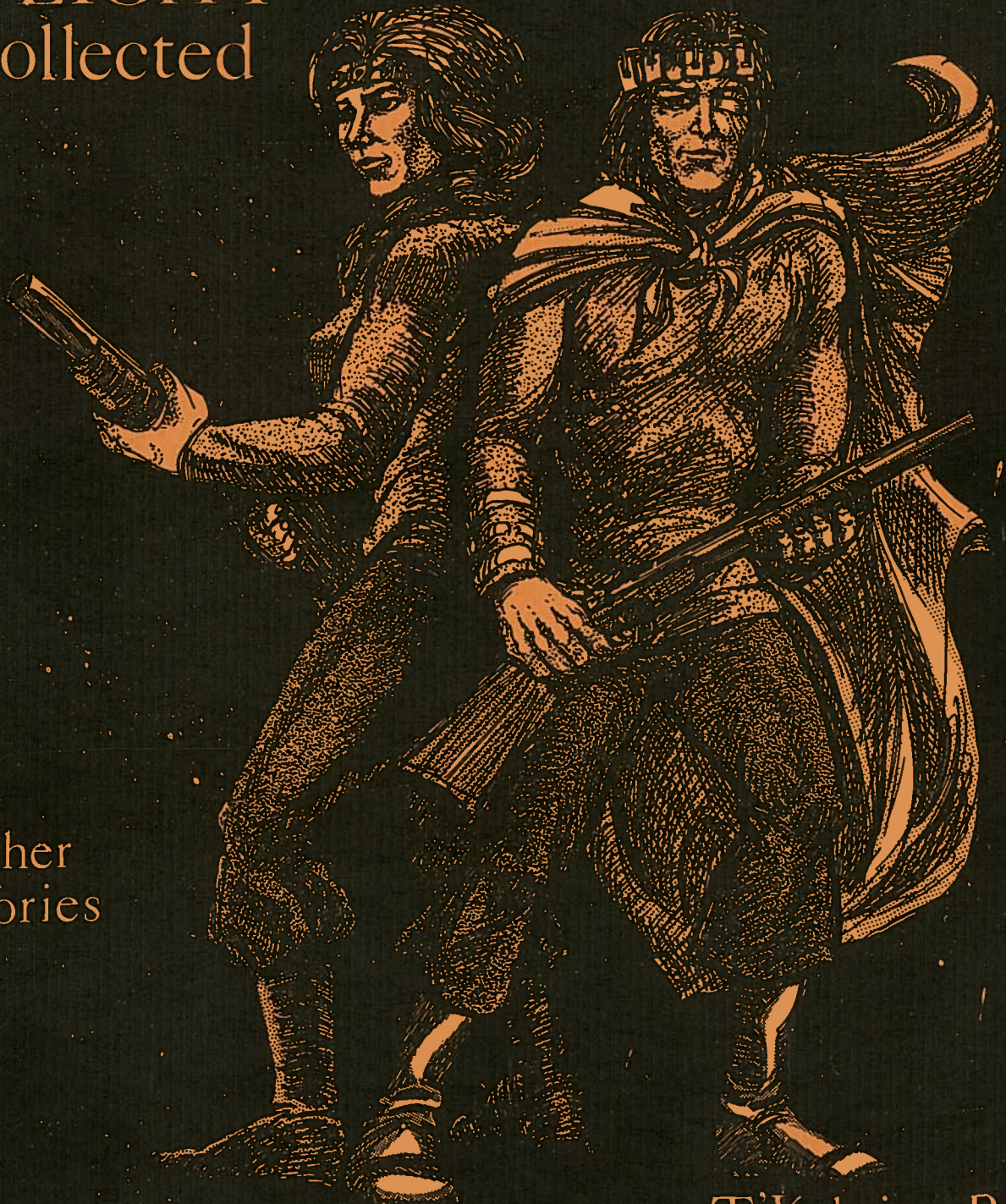


520 pages

THE WEIGHT Collected



& Other
Stories

T'Kuhtian Press

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Editorial

Leslie Fish began "The Weight" back in 1976, when it appeared in WARPED SPACE 17. It was her response to Ed Zdrojewski's "The Sixth Year," which had appeared in WARPED SPACE 3, and was her first piece of Star Trek fiction to be published. Leslie originally intended "The Weight" to end with Part 1, but it grew and grew, and eventually was serialized in WARPED SPACE over a three year period, in WARPED SPACE 19, 21, 22, 24, 25, 26/27, 29/30, 35/36, 39, 41, and 42. Two related articles were printed in WARPED SPACE 23. And the readers' lettercolumns comprise a fascinating response to this monumental work.

For this collection, I did not include the two articles by Leslie in WARPED SPACE 23, nor have I reproduced the letters that ran in WARPED SPACE that commented on the serial. Although "The Weight" was originally broken down into parts and sections, I have only retained the headers (where they existed), and they can be considered as chapters.

Thanks to the interest of and with the permission of James Van Hise, I have included two reprinted stories and accompanying artwork from his ENTERPRISE INCIDENTS #'s 7 and 8. As Jim said in his magazine, "The Weight" described nothing of the actual Romulan invasion of Earth beyond the first paragraph in his story, "A Brief Encounter In A Timeless War," though Leslie had invited others to write about it while she continued the rest of the story. Thus, the two concluding stories in this collection are the tales of the Romulan invasion of Earth in a time-line that never should have been.

With the above information out of the way, I'd like to say, as briefly as possible, that I do most sincerely apologize for the length of time it took to get this mammoth 'zine printed and distributed. I owe and acknowledge a depth of gratitude to Bill Hupe for finishing the typing, mollifying and reassuring angry subscribers, and for his constant help and encouragement. Still, this volume is not as polished as I had hoped. "The Weight" spans the time when T'Kuhtian Press rented a primitive electric typewriter to the ongoing computer/desktop publishing revolution, and we're still in the throes of familiarizing ourselves with the possibilities. Despite the best efforts of our cadre of typists, I was

(continued on inside back cover)

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still finding typos even as the camera-ready copy was left at the printers. And Leslie never did get the chance to go over the final layout and make any desired corrections. I'm sorry, Leslie!

Having said all that, I can't wait for this to come back from the printer, who assures me that perfect glue binding will hold this 520 page monster together, because while I was doing the layout, I was scanning the pages, and began hearing the music of Steeleye Span and other quoted musicians running through my head. I can't wait to find the time to sit down and read this from cover to cover, as if for the first time, marvelling again at Leslie's masterful prose and wonderful artwork. I don't think I realized what I had at the time when "The Weight" was being serialized, and Leslie, I thank you for asking WARPED SPACE to publish it!

To those of you who have waited with varying degrees of patience, thank you. I think you're going to enjoy this.

And to those of you who haven't read "The Weight" before -- enjoy!

Leslie has said "The Weight" is the first part of a trilogy. Having waited for this collection to appear, she does plan to continue the story in future issues of WARPED SPACE. And having gotten this collection in print, at long, last, look for production of WARPED SPACE and other T'Kuhtian Press publications to resume.

For reasons known best to Bill and Ann Hupe and myself, this 'zine is dedicated to Midnight, and on behalf of Marie Williams, also to Mr. Tuxedo. True friends needn't be human, nor can we measure the depth of our attachment to them by the length of our acquaintance.

Peace,

Lori

Leslie originally included a song bibliography in one of the articles on "The Weight" in WARPED SPACE 23, and at the conclusion of the story in WARPED SPACE 42. In short, musical credits are as follows:

The opening verse of Part I is "The Weight," from The Band, among others. The Saturday night hymn is "Once More My Soul," an old Pilgrim Holiness hymn collected in Indiana by Leslie's roommate. "Haul On The Bowline" is an old sea-chantey available in several folk-music collections. "Queen and Country" is from Jethro Tull's Warchild album. "Saturday Night" is from the Bay City Rollers' first album. The quote about "blood on the floor of the government store" is from Gordon Lightfoot's "Cherokee Bend" off his Cold on the Shoulder album. "We've Gotta Get Out Of This Place," is recorded by The Association, among others. The poem "And Death Shall Have No Dominion" is excerpted and condensed from the poem by Dylan Thomas. "Cold Moon, Life Hath Touched Thee" is entirely Leslie Fish's. The Chippewa medicine chant mentioned is Buffy Sainte-Marie's "Waterbug." The funeral-song that Roantree sang over the graves of the Venture's crew was Gordon Lightfoot's "Wreck of the Edmund Fitzgerald." Roantree's song for Chris Pike is from "John Riley" on Joan Baez's first album. The Anarchist version of "The Holly and the Ivy" is Leslie's own, unrecorded version. "The Hymn to Diana" really was written by Catullus and set to melody by Leslie's roommate. The pre-sacrificial song is from "The Ballad of King Henry" as recorded by Steeleye Span on Below The Salt. The version of the "Lyke Wake Dirge" used in the sacrificial scene is recorded by The Pentangle on Bakset of Light, though Leslie added two extra verses collected by Robert Graves. The closing verse of "They Told Me To Cheer Up, Things Could Be Worse, So I Cheered Up, And Sure Enough, Things Got Worse," is from Crosby, Stills, Nash and Young's album Four-Way Street, as is "Teach Your Children." "The House That You Live In," and "Too Many Clues" are from Gordon Lightfoot's Cold On The Shoulder. "Cold Wind To Valhalla" is from Jethro Tull's Minstrel In The Gallery. "Thrown Away," is by Rudyard Kipling. "The Devil Came From Kansas" is from Procol Harum's Salty Dog. "Baby Roaches," is by Kathleen Taylor et al, and was unrecorded. "The End" is from The Doors album Waiting For The Sun. "Dancing In The Meadow" is from Michael Murphy's Swans Against The Sun. "'39" is from Queen's A Night At The Opera. "The Falcon" and "Children of Darkness" are from Richard Farina, collected album. "Life-Elements Chant" is by Leslie Fish, unrecorded. "Orphans of Babylon" and "Kiss of Light" are by Be-Bop Deluxe, Modern Music. "You're Probably Wondering Why I'm Here" is from Frank Zappa's Mothers of Invention. "Hunting Girl" is from Jethro Tull's Songs From The Wood. "The Men Behind The Guns" is by John Rodney and Phil Ochs on Ochs' album I Ain't Marching Anymore. "Kodachrome" is by Paul Simon. "I'm A Stranger Here" is from The Five Man Electrical Band's Sweet Paradise. "For What It's Worth" is by Steven Stills on the Buffalo Springfield album. "Roland The Headless Thompson Gunner" appears on Warren Zevon's album Excitable Boy. "Be Not Too Hard" is by Logue, Donovan, and Fish, total version unrecorded. "Shoe The Colt" is an anonymous Mother Goose rhyme. "Won't Get Fooled Again" is by The Who, in Who's Next. "Darkness, Darkness" is by Jesse Colin Young, on Elephant Mountain.

THE SIXTH YEAR

by Ed Zdrojewski

A strange shade of emerald filled the viewscreen. It was strange because it was actually a mixture of various shades of green from a deep spinach to a light olive. In the midst of the green were occasional dots of bright silver bumps. The entire scene was criss-crossed with a network of lines like some insane spider's web. Tiny specks moved along the lines.

Scotty always felt uneasy gazing at Earth's single satellite. It didn't matter that he had seen it dozens of times. There was something unnatural about such a verdant world without any large bodies of water.

"Raise azimuth .35 radians," he ordered.

"Aye, aye sir," responded Ensign Conant, Second Navigator. His hands played over the controls on the panel in front of him.

Two areas of pitch black appeared at the upper corner of the viewscreen. The blackness spread until it covered the upper third of the screen. Below that the emerald world formed a huge lazy arc. The features on the surface below glided slowly to the bottom of the screen and disappeared.

Much better, thought Scotty. At least there was some of the familiar, comforting blackness of space.

Somehow Scotty felt glad that he had remained on board the ship. He wasn't fond of using the transporter. The momentary sensation of being dissolved and scattered throughout the sub-space universe always upset him mentally.

Transporting to the surface of the Moon was necessary. You couldn't land anything solid through the most powerful deflector shielding system in the galaxy. At one time the entire Moon was the silvery color that was only present in small, isolated patches now. The huge deflector shields were meant to keep the first man-made artificial atmosphere close to the surface. Otherwise it would quickly escape the Moon's weak gravity. Of course all the cities below were domed in case of an unlikely attack by the Klingons; the deflector shields would be the first to go.

Strangely enough, there were no clouds to mar the magnificent view. Huge matter-antimatter generators kept the temperature of the atmosphere at a constant eighteen degrees centigrade all over the lunar globe. The farm and forest lands of the plains and highlands were watered by a vast irrigation system.

Scotty leaned back in the commander's chair half-tempted to doze off. Things had been rather boring since Captain Kirk

and Mr. Spock had beamed down to take part in the inauguration ceremonies for the new Chairman of the Board for the Federation, Sebastian Giunta... There had been a minor malfunction in the food preparation circuitry but the computer had taken care of that. There hadn't been any communication with the Enterprise for three days now, not even from Starfleet Command.

Lt. Uhura leapt up from a stupor at the communications post. "Signal from the Captain, sir," she announced.

"I'll take it," replied Scotty, pushing a button on the arm of the commander's seat. "Enterprise. Scott here."

Kirk's tenor voice sounded from the bridge speakers. "Two to beam up, Scotty."

Scotty turned toward Lt. Uhura, "Send a crew to the transporter room to take care of it, Lieutenant," he said.

Uhura flipped open the intraship channel. "Bridge to Chief Leahy. Bridge to..."

Scotty turned back to the viewscreen. A technician entered the bridge and handed him a status report on the dilithium crystal deterioration. Scotty glanced over it unconcerned. Fresh crystals were on their way from Titan and would arrive in about twelve hours.

"Energize," said Kirk's voice out of the speakers.

A few seconds later Kirk spoke again. "Scotty, Mr. Spock will take over the bridge now. I'll meet you down at the gymnasium in fifteen minutes."

Nothing like having twelve hours off duty, though Scotty. Spock came onto the bridge and Scotty yielded the chair to him.

"Anyway," continued Kirk, "that Giunta character spouted off two straight hours of overworked rhetoric and tired cliches. I thought it was never going to end. I had to piss so bad I thought I was going to explode but what could I do? I mean the whole damn thing was televised all over this part of the galaxy and I just couldn't walk off. Starfleet image!"

Scotty and Kirk had just finished a vigorous round of handball. Now they were basking under the heat lamps of the men's sun room. Dr. McCoy had joined them.

Scotty rolled over on his stomach. He remarked: "I had the show piped on board yesterday. Every viewscreen on the ship. They were talking about an audience of fifty billion intelligent beings."

"I bet Spock had plenty to say about strange, illogical human customs," remarked McCoy.

"Actually, no," replied Kirk. "He didn't say a word. But I can guess what he might have been thinking. The Chairman spent two hours saying absolutely nothing about everything."

"He made a special point about not mentioning Starfleet," said McCoy. "I'll bet a weeks pay that he's going to ask the Assembly to cut Starfleet appropriations. The Enterprise might wind up an orbiting museum."

"He wouldn't dare," commented Scotty. "By the way, sir, what happened today at Starfleet Command? Are there any major changes planned down at Ibrium Central?"

"Nothing major," answered Kirk. "Some minor personnel changes. The main officer posts remain untouched. We wait in orbit for further orders."

"Who's been transferred?" asked McCoy.

Kirk thought for a moment. "Well, Harris and Conant are going to Starbase 12 with promotions. Zokkar-Garf is going to the McMurdo Space Academy to teach astrophysics. Ensign Albertson has been transferred to the Eagle. She'll have the same

position aboard that ship. Too bad. Commander Stearnman is a real bastard. Some technicians, engineers, security personnel, the usual stuff."

"What does the Enterprise come up with?" McCoy asked again.

"There are a bunch of novices coming up from the Academy. Just graduated. Spock will be interested in the Pennington girl."

"Since when has Spock been interested in girls?" McCoy quipped.

Kirk ignored him. "She's been assigned as ship's historian. We haven't had that position on the Enterprise in a long time."

"I imagine that means our orders will involve historical research. And time travel drains alot out of the engines," commented Scotty.

Kirk continued: "She was one of the top in her class. Her thesis had something to do with the twenty-first century-- Earth society in the post-Malthusian Disaster period. It's a funny thing about those kids-- their senior year they were involved with a new political movement. Something called People for Temporal Control. Have either of you heard of it?"

Scotty shook his head. "Politics are out of my field."

McCoy gazed at the ceiling. "I may have heard of it once, but what it has to do with is beyond me. It must be pretty recent."

"Remind me to look it up sometime," said Kirk.

The shrill whistle sounded over the speakers. Lt. Uhura's voice announced: "The Enterprise has just received a strange communication from an unspecified source. First Officer Spock is now tracing the source of the signal. Captain's presence is requested on the bridge."

Kirk leapt up and headed for the locker room. "Always something," he muttered.

Spock was working with Chekov at the sensor console. They were speaking in low tones. Spock turned away to consult the computer.

Kirk came onto the bridge from the lift and took his seat. "Lieutenant, did you have a copy made of the communication?" He was expecting Uhura's "yes"-- she always took the initiative like that. He tried to think of her a few years in the future as a possible ship's captain.

"Was there a visual signal?" he asked.

"No, sir," replied Uhura.

"Let's hear it," he ordered. Uhura flicked a couple of switches on the communications panel.

"It was a very powerful sub-space signal, sir," she remarked. "I think it was picked up all over the Solar System."

Some sub-space static was heard over the audi system. Then a loud voice boomed out. "This is a message for the world calling itself Earth. We wish to contact you for the purpose of verifying historical research. If you have a civilization capable of it, we request that you send a starship to the city of Chicago located at the point of origin of this signal."

More static and then silence. Kirk tried to work out the message's meaning in his head. but it made no sense to him. He decided that it was someone's idea of a practical joke. He thought for a minute of Commander

Pullen of the Starship Antarctic which was also orbiting the Moon. Pullen was known as a practical joker from Kirk's Academy days.

"How powerful was the signal?" he asked Uhura.

"I'm getting messages from Starfleet Command that it disrupted communications all over this sector," she replied. "They think we might know what's going on and are demanding an immediate report." No Federation Starship had that kind of capability.

Kirk swore to himself. "Mr. Spock, what are the coordinates of the source of that signal?"

Spock was as close as he ever came to looking pale. His voice revealed no strain, however. "Captain, there are no coordinates."

Kirk was in no mood for games. "Another Vulcan riddle?"

"Hardly," replied Spock. "The signal originated at a point approximately 6,259.71 light years beyond the periphery of the galaxy."

Kirk allowed Spock's last remark to sink in for a few minutes. "Mr. Spock...there is nothing but empty space beyond the periphery of the Galaxy."

Spock raised one eyebrow. "Captain, if I may point out, that is an unfounded conclusion. There have been no known expeditions beyond the edge of the galaxy. Therefore, there may be something out there that we do not know about. Besides, there are other galaxies, some of them within a few hundred thousand light years."

Kirk gazed at the viewscreen showing the night side of the moon. Cities gleamed up at the orbiting ship like a small galaxy of stars. "Have you checked your calculations?"

"They were Ensign Chekov's calculations, Captain," replied Spock. "I took the precaution of going over them myself. They are quite correct."

"Then obviously there is something out there capable of sending an unbelievably powerful subspace signal over thousands of light years," said Kirk. "Lieutenant Uhura, open a channel to Starfleet Command. I'd like visual contact."

The green Moon flickered out on the viewscreen to be replaced by a deep brown face revealing a heavy Afro-American ancestry. "Starfleet Command, Rear Admiral Neuman here."

Kirk replied, "This is the Enterprise. Kirk here."

Admiral Neuman continued. "I assume you received the same signal that we did. What's going on?"

Kirk rubbed his left knee with his left hand, a habitual action when dealing with the big brass. He was wondering exactly how low Admiral Neuman's IQ was as he answered. "We know as little as you, Sir. Our readings trace the signal to a source outside of the galaxy."

A shadow of disbelief fell across Neuman's face. "Did you say Outside..." An aide, probably of low rank, entered the picture and quickly handed a paper to the incredulous officer. He glanced at it. "I see...Our computers confirm this. But the contents of the message make little sense if there are intelligent beings from another galaxy trying to contact us. Did you receive the part about the city of Chicago?"

Kirk glanced at Spock. Spock's face registered nothing, as usual, as he gazed intently at the viewscreen. Kirk replied, "Affirmative. That is what at first led me to believe that it was a hoax or part of some ruse by the Klingons or some other hostile race."

"Obviously not," said Neuman. "However, I wouldn't mind finding out what the purpose of that message was and what it means."

"Definitely," Kirk agreed. "I ask leave to take the Enterprise to the source of the signal to investigate."

Neuman paused to think for a minute. "I must consult the Starfleet Manual," he said.

Kirk conjured up all the vile names he could think of and silently applied them to Admiral Neuman. You couldn't run a Fleet by the Starfleet Manual, but the idiots on top always seemed to think so.

Neuman turned and said something to one of the officers in the background. The officer approached him and they conferred for a few minutes. Neuman turned back. "I wish that I could give you authorization to take such action, Captain Kirk, but this is unprecedented. No Federation Starship has ever been sent out of the galaxy before. It would involve a major policy change. I could initiate the process but it will take several weeks with the red tape I'd have to go through."

Kirk felt anger welling up inside him. With a strong effort he forced it down. "Does this mean that the Enterprise must sit in orbit while Starfleet Command sits and debates the issue? I could give my crew a month's shore leave."

Neuman was silent for a minute. He seemed momentarily lost in thought. "I'll tell you what," he said. "I can't give you the authorization to go to the source of the signal but I can authorize you to try something else that may throw more light on the subject in the long run. If you could go back in time prior to the year 2000 to the city of Chicago, you might find out why it is so important to beings from another galaxy."

Kirk did not hesitate. "To my mind that's the next best thing."

"You have my authorization," said Neuman, "but remember that I'm sticking my neck out for you. Be extremely careful. Mistakes during time travel can do irreparable damage and if my head rolls, I'll be sure to take yours along with me. Starfleet Command out."

Admiral Neuman's face winked out, to be replaced by the glittering night side of the Moon. On the horizon a brilliant half-Earth was rising. Kirk silently cursed the admiral as he flipped the intraship com switch.

"I want all chief officers to report to the briefing room in five minutes with the exception of Mr. Sulu who has the bridge. In addition, I would like Yeoman Pennington to report to the briefing room."

The officers sat around the briefing room table waiting for Captain Kirk to begin. Kirk surveyed the room. Spock was looking straight ahead, expressionless as usual. McCoy was staring at the first officer, but Kirk had no idea what the medical officer was thinking. Scotty was looking over some notes. Uhura had a pocket recorder plugged into her ear; she was probably listening to the message once again before the conference started. The viewscreen in the center of the table showed Mr. Sulu in command on the bridge. The camera angle included Chekov at his post.

Kirk looked Yeoman Pennington over. Not bad, he thought. She was a bit taller than most. Her shiny red hair hung to her shoulders. Her bright blue eyes had a cheerful look but Kirk couldn't help feeling that there was quite a bit those eyes weren't showing. He couldn't quite tell why. He noticed with some interest that her shape filled her uniform quite nicely.

McCoy glanced at Pennington and then at Kirk. "Scotty, you'd better break out the rest of the KNO_3 if Jim here is going to get any work done without distractions."

Scotty stifled a chuckle and Pennington looked briefly embarrassed. Kirk spared a second to glare at McCoy. "I guess we'd better get things under way," he said. "I take it all of you have heard the message."

Everyone nodded. "I have rechecked my calculation several times and Mr. Chekov has done the same. The signal did originate from the forementioned point," Kirk had already understood that Spock was doing this but several crew members expressed disbelief.

Kirk continued. "As you know, there was a reference made to the lost city of Chicago. Yeoman, I believe this is your area of expertise."

Pennington picked up her cue immediately. She had a loud, somewhat piercing voice that was reminiscent of old New York.

She began, "I think I should briefly go over the very late history of Chicago for those of you who are not familiar with it." She looked at Spock. The Vulcan did not respond. "Chicago was one of the largest and most important cities of the North American land mass during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It was a hub for the modes of transportation then in use and a center for the vast agricultural region in the center of the continent.

"Chicago was attacked with a biological weapon during the Malthusian Disaster of 1987. Almost all of the population was wiped out in a day or two. The few survivors, fearing radiation, left the city very shortly thereafter and headed for the comparatively safer Arkansas coast. At that time they thought they would be heading for Louisiana, but when the suddenly higher temperatures brought on by the nuclear explosions melted ninety per cent of the polar ice caps, most of that area was submerged under the Gulf of Mexico."

"The nature of the biological attack," interjected McCoy, "was an artificial virus that was highly contagious and almost instantly fatal to humans. Once the human population was wiped out, the virus evolved into a harmless form that was incorporated into the digestive systems of birds."

"That is the last record of Chicago in historical sources," continued Pennington. "The Luna Federation geodesic survey of 2108 found a bay in Lake Michigan where the city should have been. The average depth of the lake had dropped about twenty meters from what it had been recorded as. It was also somewhat smaller than early maps show; this was quite remarkable as the size of most bodies of water had increased since 1987."

Kirk was well aware of what had happened during that period. After the Malthusian Disaster, industrial society had fallen apart. There weren't enough easily accessible natural resources left on the planet to start a second Industrial Revolution. Society had reverted to an anarchistic form, an agrarian culture with a sixteenth century technology, slightly more advanced in the area of medicine. There was no government, only traditions and customs to keep order.

That might have been the end of Earth's history except for Tycho Base. A few years before the Disaster, a self-sufficient colony had been planted on the Moon. The then barren world had the mineral resources that Earth lacked and the colony expanded. In 2092 a fleet of impulse drive ships from the Moon armed with phasers and nuclear weapons attacked the Earth and conquered the planet with little resistance. The victorious bureaucratic government of the Moon formed the Lunar Federation which became the nucleus of the vast Federation that sprawled across much of the galaxy today.

"There are two theories extant concerning the disappearance of Chicago. One is that Chicago was destroyed by a nuclear explosion after the survivors abandoned it. The other is that it disappeared into the earth after a geological disturbance."

"The first isn't possible," observed Scotty. "No nuclear device is powerful enough to vaporize several dozen cubic kilometers of solid rock."

"My feelings exactly," replied Pennington. "The Sino-Japanese-Indian bloc used biological weapons on Chicago because they wanted to wipe out the population without destroying its industrial complex."

"I have one question, Yeoman," said Spock. "Was this city located near the edge of a tectonic plate?"

"No," answered Pennington. "The nearest was the San Andreas Fault in California and that was several thousand kilometers to the west."

"Then," observed Spock, "I fail to see how a large city such as Chicago could have been destroyed by an earthquake. If Chicago was several thousand kilometers from the nearest major fault, then its location would

be near the center of the plate. The possibility of such geological stresses occurring at such a location would be so small as to be discounted."

"But not zero," said Kirk.

"Zero probabilities are quite rare in this universe," replied Spock, quoting one of his favorite Vulcan proverbs.

"Then," continued Kirk, "the possibility of Chicago being swallowed up into the ground can't be discounted."

"It is typical of humans to completely disregard the dictates of statistical probability," said Spock.

"Maybe that's why humans are where they are today," replied Kirk.

Kirk stopped to reflect for a moment. He turned to Scotty. "How are the new dilithium crystals behaving?" he asked.

Scotty leafed through a pile of reports until he found what he was looking for. "Well, Captain," he answered, "they aren't Rigel XII quality but you've got to consider that they're only from Saturn's rings and they've experienced some minor deterioration. It's a long way from the Sun out there but you have to take its action into account."

"Can they stand up to a round trip back into time?" asked Kirk.

"My guess is that they'll stand up pretty well," replied Scotty. "In any case, there are a set of back-ups sitting in the vacuum chamber."

"All right this is what we'll do," announced Kirk. "We'll take the Enterprise back to the year 1990 and establish a wide equatorial orbit around Earth. After we establish whether or not Chicago is still sitting on the shores of Lake Michigan we'll beam down a party to include Yeoman Pennington and myself. I have a feeling that something rather strange happened to the city and it wasn't an earthquake. I think that you, Spock, and Bones ought to be included because your skills might throw some light on the matter. Bones, you mentioned that the artificial virus evolved?"

"Within a few months of the attack," replied McCoy. "It couldn't survive without human hosts."

"Nevertheless, we'll wear decontamination suits until that can be established definitely," said Kirk. "Yeoman, what about radiation?"

"Heavy radiation from nuclear explosions was pretty well confined to the western half of the continent," answered Pennington. "It should be well within toleration limits."

"Does anyone have any further comments or questions?" asked Kirk.

No one did.

Yeoman Pennington entered Ship's Library Cubicle #7 and switched the auto-lock behind her. A second switch activated the flashing red "Do Not Disturb" sign.

She sat down in the single padded chair and switched on the library console. She typed in her code, which the ship's computer acknowledged by means of a beeping signal. Pennington pulled a slip of paper out of her pocket and stared at it. On it was written a code number. She typed out the number on the console. The machine hummed for a second and then a small metal cylinder appeared in a slot above the console.

With one hand she reached out to take the cylinder and with the other she picked up a pair of tweezers chained to the wall. She unscrewed the top of the cylinder and used the tweezers to withdraw the microdot. She placed the microdot in the proper slot on the console and pushed the button marked "Visual."

A complicated electrical diagram appeared on the small viewscreen on the wall behind the console. She pressed the audio button. The mechanical tones of the ship's computer filled the room.

"You are looking at a diagram for the earliest-known form of the phaser. It was used widely during the first century of colonization of Earth's Moon. This ancient weapon was developed by the United States Air Force in 1984 for the purpose of defusing missiles in a nuclear attack. That attack came three years later before such a system of defense could be fully implemented. However, this early phaser came into widespread use on the lunar colony and is used even today as the main defense weapon for Federation Starships."

"It's operation was a logical extension of the simple laser involving the synchronization of several laser beams into one more powerful beam. In the earliest models this synchronization was achieved through the use of a cesium core which...."

Pennington flipped off the audio switch. She typed in her code again and waited for computer acknowledgement. When it came she set the size adjustment dial to 450 centimeters square and pressed the button marked "Copy."

There was a few seconds of silence and then a piece of paper appeared in a slot at the bottom of the console. Pennington picked it up and glanced at the diagram printed on it. Then she switched off the power and left the cubicle.

Kirk gazed at the planet that filled the viewscreen. Below he could make out the peninsula of Lower California gliding toward the bottom of the screen. The rest of the planet was covered with white clouds. Kirk was glad that they were on the day side of the Earth. On the night side the clouds glowed.

"Are you picking up any radio or television signals?" he asked Uhura, who was listening into her earphones.

"Yes, Sir," she replied. "There are radio signals from Tycho Base on the Moon. Mostly communication between the base and parties on the lunar surface. The language is mostly late American with some Puerto Rican Spanish. I find it somewhat difficult to follow."

"What about Earth?"

"Nothing."

Kirk felt infinitely depressed. He reflected that this was how Spock must feel about the early history of his world. But it was worse because they were now orbiting Earth in the year 1990 looking down over the desolation left by World War III.

"Radiation levels are high but not intolerable," said Spock, peering into the sensors. "There is a large metropolitan area in the location of Chicago but it appears abandoned. There are large pockets of very high radiation to the west of the area but they are not near enough to cause any appreciable difference in radiation levels in Chicago itself. The nearest area of human habitation is near the coast approximately a thousand kilometers to the south."

Kirk flipped a switch on the arm of his seat. "Bridge to sick-bay."

"Sick-bay. McCoy here."

"Bones, do you think there's enough of that virus down there to cause any problems?"

"I don't know," replied McCoy, "and I won't until I get down there and take some readings. I'd recommend decontamination suits on anybody who beams down."

"Bones, I want you to report to the transporter room in ten minutes with your decontamination suit," ordered Kirk. "Mr. Spock, I'd like you to come with me down to the surface. Lt. Uhura, get ahold of Pennington and have her do the same. You have the bridge, Scotty."

It was unlike any stadium that any of them had ever seen. Kirk, Spock, McCoy and Pennington were standing in the middle of a large field overgrown with tall weeds. The tall, shadowy amphitheatre of the stadium surrounded them and the crystalline dome overhead cast a shimmering effect on the entire scene. Thousands of skeletons lay strewn about the stands, grinning at them hideously.

Kirk felt a twinge of nausea and a definite feeling of uneasiness. There were so many skeletons....

Spock was busily taking readings with his tricorder. "Radiation levels are well within the tolerance level," he remarked. "Of course, they could rise if the wind should shift around to the west or southwest, but probably not by much."

"No trace of any harmful virus," said McCoy. "I don't know about you people, but I'm going to get out of this thing." He removed his helmet.

Everyone else took the cue. Kirk called back up to the ship and had Scotty beam the suits up.

"Where are we?" he asked Pennington.

"This is Soldier's Field," she replied. "It was used for sports events."

"That's obvious," said Kirk. "Do you have any suggestions?"

"I think the best bet would be the Public Library. They would have newspapers right up to the time of the Disaster and if anything strange was going on that would be the place to find out."

They struck out across the field and climbed into the stands. Kirk thought he could smell a faint stench of death in the air. For some reason he found himself fondling his phaser as he went along.

Suddenly a loud crash sent him into a near panic. Kirk did an abrupt 180 degree turn, phaser drawn. McCoy had tripped and fallen into a pile of bones. The doctor picked himself up, swearing. Kirk was tempted to spout off a disgusting pun on McCoy's nickname as he placed the weapon into his belt but thought better of it.

They continued through a tunnel leading underneath the stands. They went past a row of ruined souvenir stands and out an exit marked "Gate 7."

They found themselves on a large asphalt plain covered with what were obviously transport vehicles. Some contained skeletons. Other skeletons were strewn helter-skelter about the entire scene. Not far to the right Lake Michigan stretched to the horizon, its endless waves lapping at the breakwalls.

Spock examined one vehicle with his tricorder. "It operates by use of combustible hydrocarbons," he said. "This one still appears to be operational."

Pennington peered through the dusty windows of the vehicle. "There is a key placed in the steering mechanism. I think the owner left it here just before the attack. The fuel gauge shows that it is completely fueled. We might as well ride to the library."

Spock announced that he would like to attempt to operate the vehicle. Pennington opened one of the doors and the four climbed in.

Spock sat behind the wheel that served as a steering mechanism and studied the various controls. "I would think that the pedal on the right would cause acceleration and the one on the left would cause deceleration. Humans have traditionally associated right with good and correct and left with evil and wrong. A totally illogical distinction."

He flipped the key. The engine made wheezing noises. Spock depressed the accelerator and the vehicle roared with power but didn't budge a centimeter. McCoy stifled a chuckle. Spock studied the controls for

a few moments and then moved a lever on the steering mechanism. The vehicle shot backwards. There was a sickening crunch as it rammed into another vehicle sitting directly behind it. McCoy let out a loud guffaw. Kirk could barely keep himself from laughing out loud. Pennington giggled.

"I don't think that's how it was done," she said.

After a few minutes more of experimentation, Spock managed to move the vehicle out onto the road which ran along the lake shore. Pennington unfolded a map that she had copied from the ship's library.

Pennington glanced briefly at her map. "This is South Lake Shore Drive. We're heading north. That's the right direction."

On the right the waves of Lake Michigan were breaking against the breakwall. It was windy. On the left a fantastic range of man-made mountains of concrete, plastic and glass sped past. The tops of the highest were hidden by grey clouds. Scattered all about were skeletons. Kirk began to recall ancient legends of Hades.

Spock pressed harder on the accelerator. The speedometer reached seventy. "Slow down," said Pennington. "This isn't a shuttlecraft."

"I'm well aware of the laws of motion, Yeoman," replied Spock.

"That's Randolph Street coming up. Turn left there," she continued.

Spock sharply turned the wheel. The tires complained with a piercing screech before the rear of the vehicle banged into a pole.

"Damn it, Spock!" exclaimed McCoy. "Are you trying to get us killed?"

They shot across a bridge over a series of parallel, rusted iron rails. "That's the railroad," pointed out Pennington. "Another form of transportation used commonly here."

Ahead Randolph Street ran through an endless canyon of concrete. "That's the library on the left," said Pennington.

Spock brought the vehicle to a stop in the middle of the intersection of Randolph and Michigan Streets. "This couldn't have been the way they stored these things," thought Kirk.

The four climbed out and looked around. Skeletons lay thickly about the edges of the street.

"The first thing to do would be to find out where they stored newspapers. They might tell us something," said Kirk.

Pennington touched Kirk's hand with a sudden strange look in her eyes. "Sir, may I leave the group for a few minutes?" she asked.

"This is a big city," replied Kirk. "I'm sure there are plenty of facilities in the library for...."

"I don't mean...." she interrupted. She pointed to a tall skyscraper diagonally opposing the library. "That's the Prudential Building, a famous landmark during its time. I'd like to take a quick look inside. Professional curiosity."

Kirk checked his wrist chronometer. "All right, Yeoman. Meet us in the library in twenty minutes."

An inexplicable joy crossed her face. "Thank you, Sir!" she said. Kirk began to think of the upcoming Federation Day party being planned on board the Enterprise. He began to run through plans of attack in his head.

Pennington turned and headed toward the Prudential Building. Kirk looked at Spock, then at McCoy. The three started toward the library.

Pennington watched the three officers enter the library through the glass doors of the Prudential Building. When the last one disappeared inside, she began to count slowly to herself. When she reached thirty she walked back to the vehicle.

She set her communicator for Wartime frequency 6 and switched it on. She raised it to her lips and softly said the word "now" into it.

Then Pennington climbed into the driver's seat, flicked on the ignition, and sped off down Michigan Avenue.

Kirk, Spock, and McCoy were seated around an ornate table, paging through yellowed newspapers. Kirk looked over the screaming, depressing headlines. "JAPAN, INDIA DELIVER ULTIMATUM TO UNITED STATES. CHINA THREATENS SOVIET UNION."

"Find anything?" asked Kirk.

"There are some 'Unidentified Flying Object' sightings in the New Orleans area. Sounds like some kind of mass hysteria." McCoy was something of an expert in this field, having a second degree in psychology.

"Wasn't New Orleans submerged?" asked Kirk.

"I remember something about an underwater archeological expedition to uncover the city," answered McCoy. "The site was covered with several hundred meters of Mississippi mud so they never found much."

Kirk's communicator began beeping. Kirk flipped it open. "Kirk here."

Scotty's voice was heard. "This is the Enterprise. We've had a major disciplinary problem up here. Could you beam up?"

"Can't you handle it yourself?" Kirk asked.

"It's been settled for now," answered Scotty. "There was a mutiny."

An ugly feeling came over Kirk. "Beam me up right away," he said.

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A sign reading "Interstate 55 ahead" flashed by. Pennington saw the concrete ramp coming up on her right. It was marked "South 55 - St. Louis." She swung the vehicle onto the ramp and down the freeway.

* * * * *

Scotty looked grave as Kirk stepped off the transporter platform.

"I left Mr. Spock, Dr. McCoy, and Yeoman Pennington below to keep researching. If you've got everything under control, there's no reason to brig them up." Kirk's voice betrayed a slight uncertainty as to what to expect.

"They're in the brig," said Scotty.

"Who?" asked Kirk as he left the transporter room. A small group of security personnel met them outside, and they started in the direction of the brig.

"The new group from the Academy," replied Scotty. "All of them."

When Kirk recovered from shock he inquired as to what happened.

"I'm not sure. I was running a status check on the engines when I heard that the bunch of them had taken over the transporter room. Of course, I sent a security contingent down and sure enough, they were holding two engineers at phaser-point. All wearing armbands and babbling about that political thing you mentioned; People for Temporal Control. I herded them all into the brig."

The eleven recent graduates were lined up against the wall. Kirk paced back and forth in front of them. Two security people stood by the entrance to the room.

Kirk began to speak. "I don't know if you've realized it yet, but this is not the Space Academy. This is a Federation starship on a mission crucial to the galaxy. This is no place for infantile, college pranks."

"You have endangered the lives of members of my crew. But what is more serious is that your actions have endangered the security and even the existence of the Federation itself. One single mistake here in 1990 can have disastrous consequences in our own time. You could have annihilated yourselves, the Enterprise, and perhaps the entire human race through your irresponsible actions. Do you have anything to say for yourselves?"

The silence was almost deafening in its intensity. Kirk continued, "I want to know about People for Temporal Control." Silence. "Immediately! That is an order!" More silence.

Kirk said nothing for a moment, then continued. "You will all face court martial when we return to our own time."

Kirk turned a military 180 degrees and walked out of the room. Scotty was waiting for him in the corridor.

"I want them placed under the mind probe," ordered Kirk. "I'm going up to the bridge to make an entry into the log and then I want to beam backdown to the surface."

"Aye, Sir," replied Scotty.

Things were normal on the bridge. SuFu and Chekov were at the navigation console holding an animated discussion about sub-space physics.

"You mean to say," said Chekov, "that there is a buffer continuum that will shield an object from anything that happens in any other continuum?"

"Definitely," replied Sulu. "You might not be familiar with it because sub-space physics is such a new subject."

"Time-travel is a recent discovery," said Chekov. "It's only been a couple of years that we've been sending starships into sub-space so any development would be recent enough to not be taught in the Space Academy."

"Well, the idea is based on Gearhart's Second Law of Sub-Space Continuum. Basically if something accidental were to happen so that history would be changed while the Enterprise were in transit between two times in sub-space, the Enterprise wouldn't be affected because sub-space acts as a shield from all other space-time continuums."

"I see," said Chekov, "But it's a bit hard to grasp all at once...."

The conversation suddenly broke off. Kirk stepped out of the elevator and took the command chair. Uhura, to whom Scotty had left the con, went back to the communications post.

"Anything new?" Kirk asked Uhura.

"Nothing interesting," responded the communications officer. "Some miner's stranded in a crater near Tycho Base, but he's been rescued. They're not aware of us because of our deflector shields."

"Scotty to bridge," came the voice of the engineering officer over the intercom.

"Bridge, Kirk here."

"Captain, I've found out about that political movement with the mind probe and you're not going to like it."

"What is it, Scotty?"

"People for Temporal Control are a group of anarchists. They want to return the human race to the simple state of the 21st century on Earth by going back in time and changing history.

Kirk felt panic rising within himself. "And Pennington?" he asked.

"She's one of them."

The Captain turned to Uhura. "Get Spock and McCoy!" he barked.

"Spock here," said the Vulcan.

"Has Pennington returned?" asked Kirk.

"Not yet, Captain," replied Spock. "We are unable to determine her whereabouts."

"Prepare to beam up," said Kirk. "Chekov, take the library computer post and locate Pennington." Kirk flipped open the intercom. "Bridge to Scott. Report to the transporter room immediately to beam the landing party on board. Two first, one at a different location. Coordinates forthcoming."

Suddenly the blue disk of Earth and the stars winked out on the viewscreen. The screen went blank. Kirk reached to contact engineering.

"Captain, sensors are out," announced Chekov.

"Communications are jammed by apparent high solar activity," said Uhura.

Kirk turned around in his chair, completely bewildered.

"Scott to bridge." Slowly Kirk acknowledged. "Transporters have malfunctioned. We can't get any power down here."

As suddenly as it had winked out, the Earth filled the screen. The dark side glowed phosphorescently at the Enterprise.

Chekov began looking into the sensors again. He exclaimed something loudly in Russian and stepped back a pace. He looked again, gasping for breath. "Captain...it's Chicago...disappeared...tidal waves...." He couldn't continue.

Kirk jumped up from his seat. He ushered Sulu away from his seat and looked into the sensors. He saw nothing but turbulent waters where the city of Chicago was supposed to be. The realization hit him that his first officer, chief medical officer, and historian were dead.

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McCoy looked up from his pile of newspapers. "Did you feel something strange, just now?"

Spock raised an eyebrow and replied, "I just had the distinct sensation that I was being transported although that is quite impossible because our surroundings haven't changed."

"I did too," remarked McCoy. "It's probably just our imaginations."

"Although you may have an overactive imagination, Doctor," said Spock, "I assure you that mine is quite normal."

"Spock - you...." A raised eyebrow reduced any further comments by McCoy to muttering inaudibility. Spock returned to the newspapers, but turned his head sharply once as the doctor mumbled something in a slightly louder tone. McCoy smiled and added, "Since the Captain called us a few minutes ago he hasn't sent us anything else. They should have at least told us that they're ready to bring us up."

"That would seem to me to be a lesser cause for concern," said Spock. "Yeoman Pennington has not yet returned. She has been gone much longer than the twenty minutes allowed her. I am of the opinion that something has happened to her."

"Nonsense," McCoy retorted. "She has a communicator and the Enterprise has the facilities to locate her. With Jim on board, she'll be beamed up if he thinks it necessary."

"Still, I think it's a good idea to try to find her. The Enterprise can locate us just as easily."

McCoy hesitated just long enough to remind Spock that he didn't like to admit defeat to a Vulcan. "If you want to be a stubborn, computerized...Vulcan...I suppose I'll just have to oblige you."

The two officers left the morgue and went out the nearest exit. As soon as they were outside, McCoy had the distinct feeling that something was wrong. It looked as if the sky had turned into a completely different shade of gray than that he had ever associated with any sky, Earth or alien. McCoy didn't dare voice his vague feelings; he was sure that Spock would ridicule them, a notion McCoy found unacceptable.

Suddenly Spock's face registered what appeared to McCoy to be the closest thing to emotion ever registered on that Vulcan face. "Doctor, would you look toward the end of Randolph Street?"

Where Lake Michigan had been spread out to the horizon, was a gray metal wall. It vaulted up in a tremendous dome - of a size that McCoy could not grasp. It arched over the huge skyscrapers of Chicago, dwarfing them, and disappeared behind them.

McCoy's reaction was total confusion. The only words he could find were, "My God!"

Spock, remaining perfectly in character, began to size up the situation. "It seems that the experience we felt, of being transported, may not have been our imaginations. Either someone or something has constructed that wall in the short time we were in the library - or the entire city has been transported to another location."

"Impossible," said McCoy. "No transporter beam is that powerful!"

"Humans have an unusual capacity for refusing to see the reality before them," observed Spock.

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The nothingness of sub-space glared out of the viewscreen at the bridge. It would have been more tolerable if there had been something there, even darkness. But there wasn't even that, just an empty nothingness.

It reflected Kirk's feelings quite well. He took no notice of what was going on on the bridge around him. He concentrated on the emptiness that was engulfing him.

The eulogy he had delivered for Spock, McCoy, and Pennington had been the most painful duty of his life. Two of them, at least, had been his best friends. At one point during the speech he had almost broken down. There was no comfort in the fact that there was no possible way that history could be disastrously changed by sabotage or accident.

"Computer has plotted correct attitude for returning to time of origin, Captain," Sulu said.

Suddenly Kirk found the emptiness on the viewscreen totally intolerable. "Bring her about, Mr. Sulu," ordered Kirk.

"Hold, Sir," barked Scotty at the engineering helm. "The dilithium crystals are starting to go...we'll never make it. I knew we should have waited for the crystals from Rigel XII."

Kirk couldn't take any more. "Dammit, why the hell does everything have to happen to my ship!" he yelled. Gaining control of himself, not without feeling a little shame, he said in a lower tone of voice, "Mr. Scott, how long will it take you to replace the crystals with the back-ups?"

"At least 48 hours, Sir," replied Scotty, still a little startled.

"Get on with it," said Kirk listlessly. "Mr. Sulu you have the con." Kirk turned to leave the bridge with the intention of appropriating McCoy's bourbon for the purpose of forgetting his troubles. "Bones would have wanted it that way," he thought.

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McCoy banged on the metal wall with his fist. There was nothing but a dull thud. He decided that the wall was very thick.

Spock had tried to raise the Enterprise without success. McCoy had tried also, but with similar result. Spock had concluded that they were beyond the limited range of their communicators as far as raising the ship was concerned.

Spock tested the wall with his tricorder. "It seems to be an alloy of very heavy super-stable metals, probably the 390 series of elements. Such metals are exceedingly rare since they are found only among the debris of a supernova."

McCoy ignored Spock. He was busy looking at his communicator and wondering if there was just a simple malfunction.

"You are the sentient organisms who were accidentally taken on board," said a deep voice behind them. Spock and McCoy spun around, phasers drawn.

There stood a humanoid, at least in appearance, dressed in a sort of silvery overalls. Spock and McCoy both recalled the voice from the tape of the message they had received while orbiting the Moon in their own time. The figure gestured with his hand and the phasers dematerialized.

The being continued as if nothing had happened. "We are sincerely sorry for having inconvenienced you. But you may not understand. I shall explain."

"I am Ylb, a member of a race from another galaxy. I am one of the crew of this ship."

"Why are we here and what's happening?" McCoy asked, still bewildered.

"If you have patience, I will explain. You are on board a very large ship, by your standards. We have come to your galaxy with this ship for the purpose of making an archeological study of the civilizations of this galaxy. We are doing this by transporting ruined and/or abandoned cities onto our vessel."

"When we came to the last world, we found a primitive civilization that must have degenerated from the higher one that produced this city. Since this city was so remarkably well-preserved, we could do nothing but take it for our studying purposes."

"We were orbiting the world you speak of in a starship of our own," said Spock. "Those on that starship are most likely following us to bring about our recovery."

"That is unlikely," said the alien. "We neutralized the sensory equipment of your ship temporarily so as to work without interference. We are now out of the range of your ship's sensory devices."

Spock made some quick calculations. He was mildly interested in the results, which indicated that this alien starship must have had an almost instantaneous acceleration to speeds in excess of warp 15.

The alien continued, "Unfortunately, we found that you had been accidentally brought on board with the city. We determined to make contact with you, and I quickly learned your language with the use of tapes."

"Obviously you are aliens to this last planet since such a low civilization could never have produced such a starship as yours."

"That is incorrect," said Spock. "We are time-travelers from the future of this very world from which you took this city."

"We apologize for this accident, but we will not return to the last planet. However, we can return you to your own time by placing you in suspended animation. We have extremely long lives."

"Out of the question!" exclaimed McCoy.

"You have no other choice," said the alien. "You will be perfectly safe and it is a guaranteed way to return you to your own time."

But there was no further need for argument. McCoy was already turning over in his mind the possibility of being both in full use of his capacities and the oldest human alive at the same time.

* * * * *

Yeoman Pennington was holding an interesting conversation with the local innkeeper. They were sitting at a table in the corner of the dining room of the Lucky Inn in the small seacoast village of Montrose, Arkansas.

"Of course the folks down here will be glad to have you in the community," said the innkeeper with his Southern drawl. "We don't get many newcomers these days. Most of them came down from up North right after the war. There were all kinds. You see that guy sitting over there?" he pointed to a middle-aged man sitting at a table on the other side of the room, drinking a beer. "That's Mike Napier, come down from Michigan. He used to be a solid-state engineer with the government, that is, when there was one."

"That's very interesting," remarked Pennington.

The innkeeper looked at his watch. "You'll have to excuse me," he said. "I've got to pick up some stuff from the market before it closes." He got up from the table.

Pennington watched Napier for awhile. After some minutes he got up from the table and headed for the men's room.

Pennington got up and quickly walked over to Napier's table. She pulled out two pieces of paper from her pocket. One was the diagram of the phaser that she had copied on board the Enterprise. The other was a note which said: "The people of Tycho Base on the Moon are planning to attack Earth someday. This weapon will stop them." She laid both pieces of paper on the table.

Pennington then walked out of the building and around to the back. Here she pulled out a black pill and swallowed it. Then she took her communicator, set it for a certain sub-space frequency, switched it on, and disintegrated.

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"All ready to go," said Scotty.

"Bring her about, Mr. Sulu," said Kirk.

"Aye, Sir," answered Sulu. He ran his hands over the navigational console. "We have the proper attitude," he said finally.

"Switch off warp engines," Kirk ordered.

The blue disk of the Earth filled the viewscreen. "Raise Starfleet Command, Lt. Uhura," said Kirk.

Uhura played with her console for a minute. "I don't understand it, Sir," she said. "There are no signals anywhere."

An ugly suspicion filled Kirk's mind. "Mr. Scott, have we returned to our own time?"

Scotty checked his instruments. "Aye, Sir," he said. "There is no Knafbean stress on the engines."

Chekov was at the library-computer station. "I want you to take sensor readings on the Moon," said Kirk.

Chekov looked for a moment. "I...don't understand it," he said. "There appears to be no life of any sort on the Moon. It's...radioactive."

"And the Earth?" asked Kirk, fear welling up inside him.

"Life, but no sign of industrialization."

Kirk sat still for a moment. Then he buried his face in his hands, overcome by the despair that fills a man when he realizes that he has completely ruined everything.

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Ylb was puzzled. He had come to the hibernation room to check on the two aliens in storage there.

But now the hibernation cubicles were empty and there was no sign of their seals ever having been broken.

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Kirk was alone now, gazing at the Earth spinning slowly beneath him. He ran over the events of the past few days, the inauguration of Sebastain Guinta, the message from beyond the galaxy, the city of death, the mutiny, the Academy graduates, the tidal waves sweeping across the plain of Illinois, the crystals, the silent Earth....

They had sent a party down to the Gulf Coast and had found an anarchist's dream - an agricultural society with no technology and no government.

They found McCoy there, a country doctor in a small village. McCoy had told them the history of this new universe.

When the Lunar Fleet of conquest had swooped out of the sky, expecting to conquer a primitive civilization, they were met by phasers. The fleet had been routed completely. The people of Earth had managed to capture a few ships, force the captives to return to the Moon, and bombed all life on that world out of existence with fusion-bombs. Then they returned to Earth - and phasers and spaceships had never been used since. It was against custom.

And Yeoman Pennington must have escaped the Chicago conflagration.

Kirk sighed. The ship was empty now, as empty as his soul. The rest of the crew had beamed down to start new lives for themselves. There was nothing to keep them here.

As for Spock...God only knew.

Kirk only knew that he could never beam down there. There were Klingons somewhere among the stars. He was the only one who could defend this tiny planet from them, if they came within his lifetime. One man could operate the ship's phasers with the help of the computer. Kirk supposed that this was his atonement for failing in his mission.

Kirk gazed out beyond the edge of the disk into the silence and depth of space. It was the end of the five-year mission.

"These are the wages of God," he said aloud to himself. It was a terribly lonely universe he had created.

* * * * *

THE WEIGHT

by Leslie Fish

The Lighthouse Keeper And The Cannibal Train, Or, You're Probably Wondering Why I'm Here

"Take the load off, Manny,
take the load for free;
take the load off, Manny,
and you put the load,
put the load
right on me."

--"The Weight," 20th Century popular song

PART I: "THE LIGHTHOUSE-KEEPER AND THE CANNIBAL TRAIN," OR, "YOU'RE PROBABLY WONDERING WHY I'M HERE."

Captain's Log, Stardate 6041.5

THREE MONTHS, TWO WEEKS AND FOUR DAYS NOW. THREE MONTHS AND MORE, TOTALLY ALONE ON THE ENTERPRISE. THREE WEEKS AT LEAST SINCE THAT LAST CALL TO THE CREW'S SETTLEMENT, SINCE I LAST HEARD A LIVING HUMAN VOICE. I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH LONGER I CAN STAND IT.... BUT I HAVE TO. THERE'S NO ONE ELSE NOW, NOTHING BUT ME AND MY SHIP TO PROTECT A HELPLESS WORLD, AND THE ROMULANS ARE OUT THERE, SOMEWHERE....

I THINK I CAN ACCOUNT FOR ALL OF IT, NOW, EVERY LAST DAMNED DETAIL. I HAVEN'T HAD MUCH ELSE TO DO, GOD KNOWS, EXCEPT GO OVER THE TAPES AND TRY TO UNDERSTAND. YES, IT WAS MOSTLY MY FAULT. STARFLEET SENT US ON THAT IDIOT MISSION BACK IN TIME TO FIND OUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED TO THE CITY OF CHICAGO AT THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY - BUT I DIDN'T HAVE TO ACCEPT THE ASSIGNMENT. THEY SENT US OFF BEFORE WE'D HAD A CHANCE TO GET FRESH DILITHIUM CRYSTALS - BUT I COULD HAVE INSISTED WE GET THE CRYSTALS FIRST. THOSE CREW REPLACEMENTS WERE AGENTS FOR THE P.T.C., AND THEY'D GOTTEN PAST SECURITY SCREENING, BUT I DIDN'T HAVE TO TAKE ONE OF THEM - THAT DAMNED YEOMAN PENNINGTON; I SHOULD HAVE BROKEN HER NECK FIRST! I DIDN'T HAVE TO TAKE HER DOWN WITH US. THAT GAVE THEM THE SET-UP THEY NEEDED, SERVED ON A SILVER PLATTER....

THE REST OF IT'S ENTIRELY MY FAULT. WHEN PENNINGTON WANTED TO GO OFF TO STUDY ONE OF THE OLD BUILDINGS, I DIDN'T HAVE TO LET HER GO ALONE. SHOULDN'T HAVE, IN FACT. WHEN THE MUTINY BROKE OUT IN THE ENGINEERING SECTION, I DIDN'T HAVE TO BEAM UP ALONE. IF I'D BROUGHT SPOCK AND MCCOY WITH ME, THEY WOULDN'T HAVE BEEN CAUGHT IN THE TIDAL WAVE, AND THEY'D BE ALIVE TODAY. MAYBE SPOCK COULD HAVE FIGURED A WAY OUT OF THIS TRAP. GOD KNOWS I CAN'T.

I'VE GONE OVER IT HUNDREDS OF TIMES, LOOKING FOR SOME ESCAPE AND FINDING NONE.... MUST TRY AGAIN.... GOT TO ARRANGE THE FACTS IN ORDER: 1) THE ERA WE VISITED WAS THE END OF THE 20TH CENTURY, JUST AFTER THE COLLAPSE, WHEN EARTH'S POPULATION HAD TURNED ITS BACK ON SCIENCE AND ALL FORMS OF GOVERNMENT, AND RETREATED TO A 16TH CENTURY TECHNOLOGY AND A WORLD-WIDE DEDICATED ANARCHISM; 2) THE ONLY SURVIVING COMMUNITY THAT KEPT ITS SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY WAS TYCHO BASE, ON THE MOON; 3) IN OUR TIME-LINE, IN THE UNIVERSE THAT SHOULD HAVE BEEN, COLONISTS FROM TYCHO BASE RETURNED TO EARTH, TOOK OVER, RESTORED PROGRESS, AND BEGAN THE FEDERATION; 4) WHAT PENNINGTON DID WAS BRING A DIAGRAM OF A SIMPLE PHASER, ESCAPE FROM CHICAGO BEFORE THE TIDAL WAVE HIT, AND GIVE THE DESIGN TO SOMEONE WHO KNEW HOW TO USE IT; 5) WHEN THE COLONISTS FROM TYCHO BASE LANDED, THEY WERE MET WITH PHASER-FIRE AND COMPLETELY WIPED OUT - SO PROGRESS WAS NEVER REBORN, INTEREST IN SCIENCE NEVER REKINDLED, THE SPACE PROGRAM NEVER RESUMED AND.... WE CAME BACK TO OUR OWN TIME AND FOUND OURSELVES....ALONE. THE FEDERATION DOESN'T EXIST. THE EARTH COLONIES DON'T EXIST. THIS TIME-LINE'S LEONARD MCCOY IS A SIMPLE COUNTRY DOCTOR IN GEORGIA, AND SPOCK....SPOCK WAS NEVER EVEN BORN....

WE CAN'T GO BACK AND SET THINGS RIGHT BECAUSE THE WEAKENED DILITHIUM CRYSTALS WON'T TAKE THE STRAIN. WE CAN'T GET MORE CRYSTALS BECAUSE THE TECHNOLOGY FOR MINING AND REFINING THEM WAS NEVER DEVELOPED. NO CRYSTALS, NO POWER, NO CHANGE. WE'RE TRAPPED. HOPELESS. HOPELESS....

THE REST OF THE ENTERPRISE CREW COULDN'T FORGIVE ME THAT, AND I CAN'T BLAME THEM. THEY LEFT, WENT DOWN TO EARTH TO START A NEW LIFE, MAYBE RESTORE SCIENCE AND PROGRESS AND LEADERSHIP TO THE WORLD.... I SHOULD LIVE TO SEE IT. UNLIKELY. IT WAS WORST FOR SCOTTY, I SUPPOSE; A STARFLEET ENGINEER, TRAPPED IN A WORLD LIKE THIS - HIS BELOVED ENGINES USELESS NOW.... NO, I CAN'T BLAME HIM, EITHER. ESPECIALLY NOT AFTER THAT LAST STUPID STUNT. I CALLED HIM UP, WASTING POWER, FOR NO PARTICULAR REASON, AND I COULDN'T THINK OF ANYTHING TO SAY EXCEPT, "SCOTTY, PLEASE TALK TO ME...." HE TOLD ME, IN NO UNCERTAIN TERMS TO SHUT UP AND LEAVE HIM ALONE. HE DIDN'T CALL BACK, EITHER. WHY SHOULD HE? WHY SHOULD ANY OF THEM? WHAT USE IS A STARFLEET CAPTAIN IN A WORLD LIKE THIS IS? THIS WORLD THAT'S MY DOING....

SO I'M ALONE UP HERE NOW; THE CAPTAIN GOING DOWN WITH HIS SHIP, OR STAYING UP WITH HIS SHIP.... I'M THE LAST OF THE LIGHTHOUSE-KEEPERS, THE FLYING DUTCHMAN OF SPACE, HOARDING ENERGY, MAINTAINING THE SHIP, WAITING FOR THE KLINGONS OR THE ROMULANS, OR WHOEVER COMES FIRST, HOPING I CAN KEEP THEM FROM FALLING ON AN UNPROTECTED WORLD - WATCHING THE SKY DAY AFTER DAY, SUFFERING NIGHTMARES NIGHT AFTER NIGHT.... THREE MONTHS OF THIS! I'VE NEVER BEEN SO ALONE SO LONG IN MY ENTIRE LIFE! IT'S ENOUGH TO DRIVE A MAN.... NO, NO, I WON'T GIVE IN! I HAVE A JOB TO DO. KEEP TO THE SCHEDULE; EAT, SLEEP, EXERCISE, CHECK OUT THE SHIP'S SYSTEMS, READ TAPES, WATCH THE SKY. ALONE.... BUT WHAT ELSE CAN A MAN DO WHO'S DESTROYED HIS ENTIRE CIVILIZATION?

GOD PITY MY LONELINESS!

Kirk stopped right there, rewound the tape, and erased it from beginning to end. Enough of that, he told himself. Self-pity won't help. I've got to hold on. Less than four months and I'm cracking up already... Stop it!

He stood up and took another turn around the empty bridge, making automatic checks at every station. The "hum" of the indicators was the only sound on the bridge, the only sound on the entire ship now, except for his own breathing and the echo of his footsteps. Kirk treasured the sound as he moved from station to station, trying to warm himself again on the thin hope that the Enterprise crew's settlement would someday restore progress to the world. Not that it's much help to me, he couldn't help adding. In a hundred years, maybe, but not in my lifetime. I'll live and die alone up here....

The readouts on the navigation board made him frown. No mistake; the orbit had changed. Somehow, since the last time he'd checked, the ship had drifted off course, northward about a thousand miles, and was now floating somewhere over the Great Lakes. How had that happened? How had he let it happen? When was the last time I checked this board?

Rack his memory as he might, he couldn't remember. The last time he was absolutely certain about was three weeks ago, just before that disastrous call to Scotty. After that....nothing. In fact, the whole day after that call was a total blank, and that scared him. Is my memory going? Why can't I.... What happened? I remember sitting here afterwards; I remember night, and day again; and getting hungry; and going down to the mess hall to eat and coming back again; and falling asleep up here more than once because I couldn't face those empty corridors again.... How long? How many days? How long did I sit up here doing nothing but stare at the screen while the ship drifted off course? I'm slipping.... I'm slipping! Don't let it get any worse!

He started to punch out the coordinates for course correction, then paused. Why bother? Why waste the ship's power to swing a thousand miles south just to hang in the air over a settlement that doesn't need me - doesn't want me - won't even talk to me? Is it worth the effort? He brushed his hair out of his eyes and noticed how long it was getting. He hadn't cut it since before the disaster. It was a small thing, but he'd let that slide, too. How many other things have I let slide? Would I be any use to the settlement if I did go back? Why do it? Three months earlier the question would never have occurred to him, but now it held his hands paralyzed on the board. He was genuinely horrified. I can't decide! I can't trust myself to make a decision!

He scrambled away from the console, promising himself he'd get back to it when he'd calmed down. Meanwhile, he might as well study the area he was in. He set the scanners for a high bird's-eye view and took a long, leisurely look.

This part of the sky was full of mechanical garbage, leftovers of Earth's abortive Space Age. There were pitted shells of communications satellites, jettisoned stages of primitive rockets, long-abandoned skylabs, even a derelict space station. For some reason most of the litter clustered around the station, some of it drifting in odd patterns, giving the area the appearance of intentional motion and purpose. Like zombies, Kirk thought, savagely depressed. The walking dead of space, in a graveyard of hopes.... Enough. I'll be seeing ghosts in a minute.

He turned back to the board, meaning to change the setting, and saw a red tell-tale winking. He stared at it, wondering if something had gone wrong with the wiring. That was a reception indicator all right, but not on the ship-to-ground channel. Someone was trying to call him, and it wasn't the Enterprise crew. His fingers shook as he opened the channel. The audio signal came in loud and clear.

"What ship? What ship? You there, the great silver pelican-shaped thing - who are you? What ship?"

The signal was noisy with static, and badly distorted. The words were oddly-accented Late American English, spoken with what might have been a flat Midwestern twang. No Romulan, no Klingon, nothing could sound like that but an Earthman - and one using bad equipment. Kirk practically fell into the communications chair, his hands moving in a near-blur as he homed in on the signal and turned the scanners on it.

There it was; on the screen, some 500 meters below him - a ship. Kirk rubbed his eyes hard, making sure that this wasn't some crazy vision. No, it was no mistake. It was still there; a long, tubular ship, much smaller than the Enterprise; a multi-stage train of mismatched parts that had clearly been cannibalized from the littered sky; cone-nosed, flanked with glowing jet exhausts - a primitive chemically-fueled rocket - something out of the dim dawn of the Space Age - coming straight for him.

"What ship? What ship? Is anybody there?" the voice insisted.

Kirk stabbed at the hailing button, ~~then paused~~, remembering that if this flying antique had come from Earth her crew - even if they had this much respect for science and progress - might still be Anarchists. He'd have to be careful.

"I - I'm James T. Kirk and this is the - the Enterprise," he answered. Leave all rank and labels out of it. Wait...see what they do.

"I'm Roantree, of the Sunfire," replied the voice, level and medium-ranged. It was hard to tell if it was male or female.

There was some scuffling and whispering in the background. Kirk caught a few phrases. "That ship.... can't be....no Luddite would....Lord of Light, how can we pass this up?...The mission....screw it!" There was a pause, and the original voice said, "Wait a minute. I'll call you back."

The signal shut down, but Kirk traced another one emitting from the primitive little ship - tight-beam, aimed at the wheeling hulk of the space station. So that thing really is manned! Kirk exulted. And it's sending another signal to Earth....somewhere in southern Michigan, it looks like.... Elated, Kirk tapped into the ship-to-station transmission and eavesdropped shamelessly.

"Sunfire to Cannibal Wheel, Roantree here. Did you catch all that, Charlie?"

"Cannibal Wheel receiving." The answer was laced with static crackle. "We got it all right, Roantree. We're all knocked on our asses down here."

"Did you relay to High Harbor?"

"All the way. They're knocked on their asses, too. What do you think of it?"

"I think we're not as alone as we thought, Charlie." Roantree's voice swelled with excitement. "We always knew there were other settlements, other towns that kept something of Science after the Fall. Somewhere on Earth there's another settlement that did what we did, only earlier - and better. Maybe they're Cape Canaveralists, or Sac-Iron-Mountaineers or Holmdellers...."

"Could they be Russians, or something like that?"

"Not likely. Kirk's got an odd accent, could be foreign, but the lettering - the name of the ship - 'Us's Enterprise,' is an American-type joke or I'll eat my braids! Somewhere on this continent, Charlie, there's another settlement of Scientists who wanted to go to space, like us. We've got to make contact with them! We've got to win them over! We've got to get on that ship!"

"What about the Moon mission?"

"Screw the Moon mission! We can get back to that later - and with these people's help! They could quadruple our chances! Did the picture of that ship come in okay? Did you get a good look at it?"

"We did. We're having trouble believing it! Talk about crazy dreams coming true...."

"Right." Roantree's reply had a grin in it. "Any objections, then, if I go over and visit?"

"Well, cut ship's power; can't waste any fuel. And be careful."

"As always. Roantree out."

Relays clicked, and the little ship called back to the Enterprise.

"Hello, Enterprise? Kirk?"

"I'm still here," Kirk managed to reply calmly.

"Well, Kirk, the Sunfire was on her way to the Moon," Roantree's voice was studiously casual, as if bumping into starships was an every-day occurrence, "but I think we can take time out for a visit. Sit tight and we'll catch up to you."

"I'm not going anywhere," Kirk couldn't help saying.

He watched while the little ship maneuvered clumsily on its jets and drew up beside the Enterprise. On its side he could make out the name Sunfire painted in gaudy red-and-black letters. Both the name and the lettering gave the primitive craft an air of barbaric innocence. A hatch opened and a heavily-suited figure stepped out into the void. The suit was as awkward and primitive as the ship, and was maneuvered by equally-clumsy hand-jets.

"Kirk?" Roantree's voice was further distorted in transmission. The suit's communications system was horribly primitive. "Where's your nearest hatch?"

Should I beam him aboard? Kirk wondered. No, that would scare them silly. "Proceed forward about twenty meters," he guided the suited explorer, "then five meters on your right. I'll get the hatch open."

He paused only to re-start Life Support for that sector, then hurried off the bridge, into the turbo-lift, and down the corridor. He could hear the thumpings on the outside of the hatch as he worked the manual controls, and it took effort to keep his hands from shaking. The outer hatch closed, air hissed into the lock, and the pressure gauge rose, agonizingly slowly. At last Kirk swung the inner hatch open and laid eyes on his visitor.

The bulky-suited figure looked at him, hesitated, then stepped into the corridor and removed the suit's helmet. Kirk found himself looking into level hazel eyes, a strong wide-boned face surmounted by thick light-brown braids held back by a bandana-headband. Long hair in a spacesuit? Kirk wondered, watching the big hazel eyes sweep curiously over him.

"Hello," said the visitor. "I'm Coordinator Roantree."

"Pleased to meet you...." Kirk mumbled, silently feasting on the sight and sound of another human being, especially another spaceship captain.

Roantree gave him an odd look, then shrugged and began peeling off the suit. First there were clamps, dozens of them, holding down seams that ran from wrist to throat to ankle. The seams opened, the suit slipped off, and Kirk saw that it was nothing but a crude armored shell. There was another suit under it, made of thick rubber, sealed with pressure-zippers. Kirk watched, fascinated, as that came off too, and revealed still a third suit - this one made of sheepskin, with the wool still on it. My Lord, Kirk thought, nothing but layers - sheepskin and rubber and steel-braced plastic! How could they expect to survive in such things? He shuddered, thinking of how easily that contraption could leak air, or be punctured by a random meteor.

Roantree squirmed out of the last layer of suit, and Kirk stepped backwards incredulously. Roantree was wearing a Starfleet uniform! No, not exactly a Starfleet uniform - but so close....black heavy boots, black denim pants, soft yellow buckskin shirt.... And she's a woman!....and I know I've seen her somewhere before!

Project Tape R-34, Roantree recording.

IT'S UNBELIEVABLE! IT'S A SHIP OF WONDERS! THESE PEOPLE ARE HUNDREDS OF YEARS AHEAD OF US! JUST THE SIZE ALONE - YOU COULD FIT MOST OF THE UNIVERSITY PERSONNEL IN HERE.... I TOOK PICTURES UNTIL MY FILM RAN OUT, THEN CALLED IN SPARKS, BAILEY, AND QUANNECHOTA - AND THEY TOOK PICTURES UNTIL THEIR FILM RAN OUT, AND WE STILL HAVEN'T COVERED A QUARTER OF IT. YES, THIS IS A HELLUVA LOT MORE IMPORTANT THAN THE MOON MISSION!

WE CONFERRED WITH THE REST OF THE CREW AND AGREED - UNANIMOUSLY, IF YOU PLEASE - TO MOVE EVERYONE OUT OF THE SHIP FOR THE TIME BEING. IF ANYTHING, WE'RE HAVING TROUBLE GETTING VOLUNTEERS TO KEEP AN EYE ON THE SUNFIRE. WE'LL RELAY THE TAPES THROUGH THE WHEEL JUST AS FAST AS WE CAN SEND THEM. ACCORDING TO SPARKS, WE MIGHT EVEN BE ABLE TO SEND MESSAGES DIRECT TO HIGH HARBOR, IF HE CAN TALK KIRK INTO SHOWING HIM HOW THE SHIP'S INCREDIBLE COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEM WORKS. IT SHOULDN'T BE HARD; KIRK SEEMS, IF ANYTHING, PASSIONATELY WILLING TO TALK TO US.

HE PUZZLES ME MORE THAN HIS SHIP DOES. WHY IS HE ALONE UP HERE? WHAT HAPPENED TO THE REST OF HIS CREW? WHY IS HIS HAIR CUT SO SHORT? BY THE MOTHER, HE DOESN'T HAVE ENOUGH HAIR TO MAKE A DECENT JEFFERSONIAN PIGTAIL! IS HE SOME SORT OF EXILE? THAT WOULD EXPLAIN HIS HELL-HAUNTED EYES....AND WHY HE'S SO AWKWARD AND STRANGE, AND FRANTIC FOR COMPANY. BUT WHY SHOULD HE BE EXILED UP HERE, ON THIS SHIP? HOW LONG HAS HE BEEN ALONE UP HERE, ANYWAY? THERE'S SOME GREAT MYSTERY ABOUT THIS SORCERER, AND IT'S MY JOB - MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE RIGHT NOW - TO FIND OUT WHAT IT IS.

Captain's Log, Stardate 6049.1

THEY'RE ANARCHISTS, ALL RIGHT, BUT THEY'RE FROM A COMMUNITY THAT RETAINED SOME SCIENCE WHILE THE REST OF THE WORLD REVERTED TO SIXTEENTH CENTURY TECHNOLOGY. SPOCK WAS RIGHT; A CIVILIZATION DOESN'T COLLAPSE ALL AT ONCE - THERE ARE LITTLE POCKETS HERE AND THERE THAT HOLD ONTO CIVILIZATION LONGER THAN THE REST. HIGH HARBOR, THE TOWN THESE PEOPLE COME FROM, IS APPARENTLY ONE OF THOSE POCKETS.

IT WOULD SEEM THE SETTLEMENT WAS ORIGINALLY A UNIVERSITY TOWN - BUILT AROUND ONE OF THE BETTER COLLEGES IN THE MIDWEST - AND WHEN EARTH'S GOVERNMENTS FELL AFTER THE COLLAPSE THIS COMMUNITY WANTED TO KEEP ITS KNOWLEDGE. ITS PARTICULAR PRIDE WAS ITS CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE SPACE AGE, AND IT CONCENTRATED ON THAT - ALMOST DEFIANTLY. FOR THE PAST 300 YEARS ITS PEOPLE HAVE BEEN CONTINUING THE SPACE PROGRAM - WITH NOTHING BUT THE RESOURCES OF ONE TOWN! IT'S TAKEN THEM A LONG TIME: THEY GOT THE SPACE STATION, THE CANNIBAL WHEEL, FIT FOR HUMAN HABITATION MORE THAN 50 YEARS AGO, AND SINCE THEN THEY'VE BEEN CANNIBALIZING EVERYTHING THEY COULD GRAB OUT OF THE SKY OR SHIP UP FROM EARTH. IT TOOK THEM THAT LONG TO BUILD AND STOCK THE SUNFIRE, BRING UP A CREW, AND MAKE A RUN FOR THE MOON. AND THEN THEY RAN INTO ME....

I DON'T KNOW HOW THIS MEETING IS GOING TO AFFECT THEM, BUT FROM WHAT I CAN GATHER, THEY'RE ALREADY TALKING OF AN ALLIANCE BETWEEN THEIR TOWN AND MINE. THEY SEEM TO THINK THAT THE ENTERPRISE WAS BUILT BY ANOTHER SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY, AND SO FAR I'VE LET THEM GO ON THINKING THAT. IF I CAN TALK TO SCOTTY, IF HE'S WILLING TO TALK TO ME....MAYBE WE CAN MAKE THAT ALLIANCE WORK. MAYBE, IN TIME, WE CAN SPREAD OUT - SEEK OUT OTHER SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITIES - START A FEDERATION, AS IT SHOULD HAVE BEEN STARTED CENTURIES AGO....

I'M TRYING TO UNDERSTAND HOW THE ANARCHISTS ARE ORGANIZED. THEY DON'T SEEM TO HAVE RANKS, JUST EQUAL-RANKING SPECIALISTS - AND DON'T SEEM TO HAVE ANY UNIFORMS. ROANTREE'S "STARFLEET UNIFORM" WAS JUST AN ACCIDENT OF PERSONAL TASTE. THEY ALL WEAR THEIR HAIR LONG, HELD BACK BY BANDANA HEADBANDS. AS NEAR AS I CAN TELL, THE ONLY BADGES OF OFFICE THEY HAVE ARE THE TOOLS OF THEIR TRADE; THEY ALSO HAVE TATTOOS ON THEIR HANDS.

ROANTREE'S HAIR, UNLIKE EVERYONE ELSE'S, IS TIED IN TWO BRAIDS THAT FALL OVER HER HEADBAND AND DOWN BELOW HER SHOULDERS. HER TATTOO IS A LITTLE DIFFERENT FROM THE OTHERS - THE SUNBURST HAS MORE RAYS. THE OTHERS CALL HER "BRAIDER" WHEN THEY THINK I'M NOT LISTENING. IS THAT THE EQUIVALENT OF "SKIPPER?"

WHERE HAVE I SEEN HER BEFORE? SHE'S THE EQUIVALENT OF SOMEONE I KNOW, BACK IN MY OWN TIME-LINE, BUT WHO IS SHE? HER NAME - JENNETH ROANTREE - THAT'S DAMN FAMILIAR. SO IS HER FACE, AND HER BODY.... SHE'S A BIG-HIPPED AND BIG-BREADED, HEAVY-JAWED, BROWN-HAIRED, HAZEL-EYED, WITH A DEEP CONTRALTO VOICE THAT CAN LIFT TO A GOOD HIGH BELLOW WHEN SHE NEEDS IT....OH HELL, I LIKE HER. THERE'S MORE TO IT THAN JUST MY LONELINESS AND HER HANDSOME BODY. SHE TALKS AND MOVES AND ACTS WITH AN EASY SELF-CONFIDENCE - I USED TO HAVE IT MYSELF, BEFORE ALL THIS HAPPENED. MAYBE I ENVY HER. IN ANY CASE, SHE'D MAKE A FINE STARSHIP CAPTAIN.

THE OTHERS ARE DAMNED GOOD AT THEIR JOBS. THERE'S ANN BAILEY, FOR INSTANCE: SHE'S THE CHIEF MECHANIC, A GREY-HAIRED WOMAN WITH THE USUAL OX-LIKE STRENGTH - AND A TONGUE THAT COULD BLISTER PAINT OFF A WALL OR MAKE AN ACADEMY DRILLMASTER BLUSH. SHE'S BEEN CLIMBING ALL OVER THE ENGINES SINCE THE MOMENT SHE GOT ABOARD, PRACTICALLY WORSHIPPING THE DAMNED THINGS. SHE'D GET ALONG FINE WITH SCOTTY. COULD SHE POSSIBLY BE....NO, NO, IMPOSSIBLE. SCOTTY WAS BORN IN INVERNESS; COULDN'T POSSIBLY HAVE REACHED SOUTHERN MICHIGAN, NOT IN A WORLD LIKE THIS....

AND SPARKS VANDERHOOF IS NOTHING LIKE UHURA! HE'S THEIR COMMUNICATIONS EXPERT. HOW ANY SHIP COULD LONG SURVIVE HIS PRACTICAL JOKES IS BEYOND ME! ON THE SHIP LESS THAN HALF A DAY, AND HE HAD JOYBUZZERS IN HALF THE CHAIRS! WHERE DID HE GET THE TIME FOR IT, BETWEEN HANDLING THE 3-WAY COMMUNICATIONS AND STUDYING THE ENTERPRISE'S COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS? OH WELL, I SUPPOSE HE HAS TO BE A GENIUS TO THINK UP SOME OF THOSE STUNTS.... JUST THE SAME, WHEN I SEE THAT TELL-TALE GRIN FORMING BETWEEN HIS SHAGGY BLACK HAIR AND HIS SHAGGY BLACK BEARD, I START TO WORRY....

THEN THERE'S THEIR SCIENCE-OFFICER EQUIVALENT - A TALL, RAWBONED INDIAN WOMAN NAMED QUANNECHOTA TWO-FEATHERS, WHO USUALLY HAS NO MORE EXPRESSION THAN THE PROVERBIAL WOODEN CIGAR-STORE INDIAN, BUT WHO HAS GONE ABSOLUTELY ECSTATIC OVER THE SHIP'S COMPUTERS. GOOD THING I TOOK CARE TO PUT SOME VOICE-CODED BLOCKS ON THE COMPUTER'S MEMORY BANKS, OR SHE'D HAVE THE WHOLE STORY BY NOW. THERE ARE TIMES SHE REMINDS ME OF SPOCK....

ROANTREE, SPARKS, BAILEY, QUANNECHOTA - THEY SEEM TO BE THE TOP EXPERTS, THE ROUGH EQUIVALENTS OF SENIOR OFFICERS. THEY'RE THE ONES I'LL HAVE TO PERSUADE BEFORE I CAN SWING THE OTHERS....

IT'S NEARLY TIME TO TRY RAISING THE CREW'S COLONY. I'LL HAVE TO MAKE THEM LISTEN TO ME, SOMEHOW - ALSO, I'D BETTER WARN ~~them~~ ABOUT WHAT NOT TO MENTION....



It was Uhura who answered him. Even if she hadn't forgiven him, she was at least willing to listen. She promised to call him back, and Kirk sweated through the long hours until the reply came in. Sparks was sitting at the console when the call came through, and his resulting bellow could have been heard over most of the ship.

"It's the other settlement!" he yelled. "They've called High Harbor - and they want an alliance! They want an alliance with us!"

The other Anarchists cheered, whooped, and howled with glee.

Kirk sat back in his chair and wilted with relief. It had been so easy, so fast, both communities so willing.... He could scarcely believe it.

Roantree came up beside him and squeezed his shoulder. "Citizen Kirk," she grinned, "there won't be any more work done today. Let's go to the dining room for a quiet drink or two, before the others come down and the celebration starts."

"Gladly," Kirk agreed, getting out of his chair. "I feel a definite need to unwind."

Quannechota quietly followed them into the turbolift, and the three of them went to the mess hall. Ten minutes later, over three large mugs of beer - which the Anarchists drank like water - Roantree started the questions.

"I guess I don't need to tell you," she began, "how pleased we are with the alliance. You can imagine what it means to us, to join with another scientific colony after all these years of going it alone."

"It means much to us, too," Kirk admitted.

"How much?" Roantree pounced. "Why were your people so eager to join with us? What do they have to gain by it? Not scientific knowledge, surely - this ship - your people must be a hundred years ahead of us at least!"

A fleeting look of embarrassment - or anger - crossed her face. Kirk realized that the High Harbor people had their pride, and there was necessarily some resentment mixed with their delight in finding a people more advanced than themselves.

"Well, there are few enough scientific communities in the world," Kirk offered. "We need each other. Your people may not be as advanced as mine as far as spaceflight goes, but you could still be ahead of us in other areas...."

Roantree glanced at Quannechota, who nodded wordlessly. Kirk wondered what that meant, but his attention was snagged by a detail he'd missed before. Besides the stylized sunburst tattoos on the backs of their right hands, both women had crescent-shaped scars on the backs of their left hands - scars too much alike to be accidental.

"What are those marks?" he couldn't help asking.

"These?" Roantree held up her hands. "They're totem-marks; personal reminders of the things we hold sacred. The sun symbolizes the mind, and respect for science. The moon symbolizes the heart, and respect for freedom." She leaned forward to look him square in the eye. "Let no Luddite ever spread such lies about us, Citizen, as to make you believe that we don't worship freedom! We love freedom! Just because we believe in science doesn't mean we want to bring the old days of tyranny back! We love freedom as much as any, and that's why the mark of the moon is cut into our hands. Do you understand?"

"Uh, of course," Kirk floundered. Totem marks? Scarification? Barbarism I never thought to see on Earth.... Just how primitive are these people? "What's a Luddite?"

"'Luddite' is our word for those who believe science to be evil," Quannechota replied levelly. "It derives from the name 'King Ludd,' a legendary figure of the early Industrial Revolution. He protested the abuses of the bosses by smashing machinery and advocating a return to pre-industrial technology. He has since become a symbol for the hatred of scientific progress which is espoused by our community's neighbors. For us he has become...." she glanced at Roantree, "a sort of devil figure."

Roantree frowned and gave a single, minute shake of her head. Kirk wondered again about these personal signals, but Roantree cut off his speculations with another question.

"You know, Citizen, your people have been mightily discreet about their progress. Considering the amount of land and people and resources you'd need to build a ship like this, I'm surprised that some rumor of your existence hasn't reached us before. You're a good thousand miles away, but I still think a community of such size and strength would send ripples of news all over the country. How is it that this is the first we've heard of you?"

"Well, we haven't heard about you, either." Kirk stalled while he scrambled for a plausible answer. "For all we knew, we were the only scientific community left on Earth." He paused, while Roantree and Quannechota exchanged fleeting, worried looks. "It made us a bit, uh, paranoid. So we did our best to keep ourselves hidden. We didn't think there was anyone else, so we didn't spend much time looking." Spock would have thought to search the old space-garbage. Spock would have thought of it, but he's gone... Spock...

"Quite probable," Quannechota murmured.

"There may still be hope then...." Roantree whispered. "Still, if your people could build such a ship, they could have done much more. Why haven't your people searched the world more thoroughly, Citizen? Why haven't they settled the moon? Why haven't we met in space before? Where are the rest of your ships?"

"There's only the one," Kirk admitted. "This is all we've got, and we - we haven't been in space that long. The Enterprise got here only four months ago." True enough!

"Four months?" Quannechota sounded almost shocked. Obviously, the answer didn't begin to satisfy her.

"That still leaves a lot unexplained," Roantree insisted, leaning forward until her eyes were inches from Kirk's. "For instance, why is this ship sitting up here doing nothing? Why is it empty - except for you - when it was obviously made to hold hundreds of people? Why is this incredible treasure-house of science nearly abandoned?"

Kirk couldn't answer. The familiar pain had surged up to choke him into silence.

"Why is your hair cut so short?" Quannechota added. "Are you in exile for some crime?"

"Yes!" Kirk blurted out. "I destroyed everything! I...." Don't tell them that! "The ship - is almost useless now. The dilithium crystals are almost dead, and...and...look, I made a mistake. One small stupid mistake, but it ruined our whole civilization, and...." Careful! "It was my fault. The rest of the crew left me and went down - back to Earth to start over - left me alone up here.... I stayed with the ship; the only friend I have now...." Shut up! You're saying too much! "That's the story. Please don't ask me anything more...."

The two women looked at each other, then at him. The unmitigable sympathy on their faces only made the pain worse. Roantree stood up, Quannechota following, and rested a hand on his shoulder. "It's all right, Kirk," she said. "We won't pursue this. Finish your drink and we'll see you later - at the celebration."

With that, they turned and went out, leaving Kirk staring miserably into his now flat beer.

Project Tape R-41, Roantree recording.

CURIOUSER AND CURIOUSER! WHAT EXACTLY WAS KIRK'S CRIME? HOW DID IT DESTROY HIS COMMUNITY? THE ONLY ANSWER WE HAVE CAME BY ODD MEANS, AND IT'S UNBELIEVABLE, NOT TO MENTION INCOMPREHENSIBLE.

AFTER KIRK'S CONFESSION, WE WENT BACK TO THE CONTROL ROOM AND QUANNECHOTA SAT DOWN IN FRONT OF THE MEMORY MACHINE. SPARKS WAS THERE, TRYING TO GET THE HANG OF THE VIEWING MACHINE. I SAT DOWN IN THE BIG CHAIR AND WATCHED THE PICTURES ON THE SCREEN - IT'S AMAZING WHAT YOU CAN SEE FROM HERE - UNTIL QUANNA CALLED ME OVER FOR A CONFERENCE.

"PART OF THE MEMORY IS LOCKED UP," SHE SAID. SHE PRESSED A BUTTON AND THE MACHINE VOICE SAID SOMETHING ABOUT THE INFORMATION BEING RESTRICTED UNDER A LOCK THAT COULD ONLY BE OPENED BY THE VOICE OF THE CAPTAIN.

"ODD," I SAID. "TO CALL HIM A CAPTAIN - CAPTAIN KIRK. COULD THEY HAVE GIVEN HIM THE TITLE AS A MARK OF SHAME?"

WITHOUT QUANNA TOUCHING IT, THE MACHINE SPOKE AGAIN. "VOICE LOCK OPEN," IT SAID. I STOOD THERE WONDERING WHAT HAD MADE IT DO THAT WHILE QUANNA PRACTICALLY POUNCED ON THE THING AND STARTED ASKING IT QUESTIONS.

IT GAVE US ANSWERS. LORD OF LIGHT, DID IT EVER GIVE US ANSWERS! WHAT IN THE MOTHER'S NAME IS A "SPACE-TIME CONTINUUM?" WHAT IS AN "ALTERNATE UNIVERSE?" WHAT HAPPENED 200 YEARS AGO, AND HOW ON EARTH COULD KIRK BE RESPONSIBLE?

IT'S TOO STRANGE FOR ME. I LEFT QUANNECHOTA WORKING ON IT, AND I'M HEADING BACK TO THE DINING ROOM. THEY'LL BE WANTING ME WHEN THE PARTY GETS UNDERWAY.

Kirk had replaced his beer with a fresh one and was determinedly drinking his way out of his depression when the other Anarchists filed in. He watched, grinning a little, as the poked gingerly at the food-selector buttons and came away with overloaded trays and mugs. It was impressive how much they ate and drank. Obviously they were used to more heavy physical labor than his own crew. They ate silently and fast, preferring to sit and talk at length after meals, usually over more mugs of beer.

As he watched the Anarchists pull their chairs into a rough circle and start on what looked like a cheerful drinking party, Kirk let his thoughts wander back to Jenneth Roantree. Whatever kind of game she's playing with me, she scored high today, he thought. You're slipping, James T! Usually duels with her end in a draw; this time she learned a damned sight more about me than I learned about her. I don't have any edge in physical skills, either. When I invited her to work out with me in the gym, damned if she didn't throw me at least as often as I threw her! of course, she's got the hips and thighs for it...muscled like a draft-horse - High Harbor women must work as hard as the men. She doesn't look oafish, though - quite the contrary. Damned handsome woman. Could fall in love with her - if I'm not careful.... Is she this time-line's equivalent of a woman I once knew and loved? Possibly, but who? That eerie familiarity bothers me.... Hell, she could be one of my relatives! I have some maternal cousins named Roantree...hope she isn't too closely related.... hope she isn't married....

Roantree walked in, with Sparks trailing behind her. She came up to Kirk, glanced at the others, and smiled ruefully. "They'll be wanting me to come and sing in a bit," she said as she sat down. "Sparks, would you get me a beer, and then my 12-string?"

Sparks grumbled as he went over to the selector, grumbled as he came back with the beer, and grumbled as he went out to get the "12 string," whatever that was.

"Don't mind his bitching," Roantree smiled as she gulped the beer. "He'll come back grinning like crazy, with some trick up his sleeve. He's been working on something that he won't tell us bout, and you can guess what that means."

"Probably a personalized set of whoopee cushions," Kirk commented, considering Sparks' sense of humor.

"Too big," Roantree replied, wiping foam off her mouth with her scarred hand. "Whatever he's up to, it's small enough that he can hide it in our cabin where our best searches couldn't find it."

"Our cabin? How many of you are packed in there?" That deck has nothing but singles and doubles....

"Just the three of us. What the hell, we're tripled anyway. Might as well stay together."

"Tripled....?"

"Married triple." Roantree gave him an odd look. "Don't your people have the custom?"

"Married - three - what....?" Him and them? She's married? "How?"

"All three of us signed child-raising contracts," Roantree answered, watching him carefully. "For us, that's the easiest way to deal with the fertility problem."

"Fertility problem?"

"Our fertility problem." She turned her head to one side, still staring at him. The gesture was damned familiar. "I take it," she said slowly, "that your people were better than ours at cleaning up the damage from the Genetic Wars."

"Huh? Oh...yes, we cleared that up a long time ago. Why?"

"We didn't." She leaned back in her chair and rubbed her tattooed hand across her chin. "Kirk, our medicine isn't as good as yours. After three hundred years we're still carrying scars on our genes. About one-third of our people are sterile, or worse. The rest of us often have trouble bearing children...." She bit her lip and stared into her beer for a moment. "With us, the usual family consists of three adults - two fertile and one sterile. The non-breeders take a share of the child-raising. Besides being economical, it gives them, well, some stake in the next generation...."



"I see." How horrible! But what else could they do? It makes sense.... But, how do they manage, uh... do the women take turns with him?

Just then Sparks' heavy footsteps approached and his hearty bellow rang out across the mess-hall. "Here it is, Jen! Get your fingers warmed up!"

Heads turned. Cheerful voices called.

"Hey, hey, the 12-string!"

"Get this show on the road!"

"C'mon, Braider, come sing for us!"

"All right," Roantree acquiesced, grinning. She stood up, took the big instrument case that Sparks handed her, and walked away with him toward the circle of seated and expectant Anarchists. Kirk watched for a minute, then cautiously picked up his beer and followed them to the circle and took a chair on the outside.

Roantree tuned up. Her 12-string was the oddest instrument he'd seen in a long time - it had a long neck and 12 paired strings, arranged guitar-style, and the body was a deep round drum with an adjustable iris-like top and an open back. Roantree pulled the body of the instrument close under her breasts and adjusted the sling-strap to hold it in place. Kirk realized that she was using her own lungs and diaphragm to augment the soundbox. Playing that must be difficult. Odd skill for somebody as busy as a ship's captain....

"Any requests?" Roantree asked.

"Seeing how's tomorrow's Sunday," Ann Bailey spoke up, "why not get the hymn out of the way first?"

Kirk remembered Roantree's earlier comment about totems. They're science-worshippers! The senior Engineer is probably the High Priest! Or priestess, in this case. What would Scotty think?

Roantree nodded agreement, tested a chord or two, and swung into a solemn tune. The 12-string rang like tuned bells. The other Anarchists picked up the melody and, as the verse came around, began to sing in surprisingly good harmony.

"Once more, my soul, the rising day
salutes thy waking eyes.
Once more my voice the tribute pays
to him that rules the skies.

"Rules?" Kirk couldn't help asking Sparks.

"Yeah, rules," Sparks whispered back. "You know, like, to measure with a ruler. Measuring off the sky. See?"

"Oh."

"Night unto night the name repeats.
The day renews the sound,
wide as the heaven on which he sits
to turn the seasons round."

"I see," said Kirk. The sun, on their hands! They've built a whole mythology around their science-worship!

"My God, may all my hours be thine
while I enjoy the Light.
Then shall my Sun in smiles decline,
and bring a pleasant night."

There was a moment's respectful silence and a solemn raising of beer mugs all around. The little company drank and then, as if that had broken the spell or finished some rite, started clamoring for more songs. Roantree laughed and swung into an old sea-chantey that Kirk recognized from his Academy days.

"Haul on the bowlin',
the bloody ship is rollin',
Haul on the bowlin', the bowlin', ho!"

"She's got a pretty good voice," Kirk remarked to Sparks, hoping that it wasn't bad manners to compliment somebody's wife, or second wife, or co-contractee, or whatever.

"Oh, yeah," Sparks agreed. "You gotta have a good voice to be a Braider. Gotta know a song for every occasion, too."

Kirk thought that over while he listened to verses that he'd never heard in his Academy days. The song got progressively dirtier, and funnier, and more mutinous as the verses went on. Roantree seemed to know dozens of them... By the fifteenth verse, Kirk wished he could sing. By the twentieth verse he dared try it. By the twenty-fifth verse he found that he definitely could not carry a tune. By the thirtieth verse, which coincided with his fifth beer, he decided that it didn't matter; the other singers could drown him out anyway. It was turning into a very, very nice party.

Somewhere between five songs and three beers later - after Kirk had heard all the words to "Yo, Ho, Ho, and a Bottle of Rum," - Roantree complained that her fingers were sore, and she needed to take a breather. A chorus of "Aw, damn!'s" was drowned out by Sparks' bellow that he'd "dug up a whole mess of good Rock-steel songs on the memory-machine," and could play them over the loudspeaker. The wails turned into whoops, and Sparks, who'd obviously been planning this for some time, went to the wall communicator and gleefully threw several switches. Kirk, who was marveling over the expertise Sparks had gained with the ship's communications, and wondering what "Rock-steel songs" would be, was jarred out of his seat by a blast of screeching guitars, earthquake drums, and a ferociously amplified chorus of:

"For Queen and country,
in the long, dying day;
and it's been this way for five long years
since we signed our souls away...."

Then the Anarchists got up to dance. Kirk managed to retrieve his beer, withdraw to the sidelines without being trampled, slide into a chair, and watch. Now he could understand where all that food went. Do they do this every Saturday? The music changed - a faster rhythm and a belting chorus of "Saturday night! Saturday night!" - and the pattern of the dancers changed with it. Kirk got up to refill his beer mug and was snagged by Jenneth Roantree, all wide grin and flying braids.

"Kirk," she asked, taking hold of his wrists, "can you dance the Northern Reel?"

"Uh, I sort of remember the Virginia Reel. Is this much different?"

"Only a little. Come on, I'll show you the steps."

Five minutes later, whirling up and down the line of dancers, Kirk wondered if he hadn't made a mistake. By the time the dance was over, he was certain that his biggest mistake since the Change had been in letting himself get out of shape. Roantree, leaping and bouncing like a steel spring, seemed ready to go on for hours. Kirk excused himself and sat down, already aching with expectation of the next morning's cramps and hangover. Roantree smiled, shrugged, picked up Sparks, and whirled back into the circle of dancers. Kirk glumly watched her leaping away to the tune of a song about "blood on the floor of the government store," and felt sorry for himself.

She's beautiful, he thought. And she's competent, and she's strong as an ox, and she sings and dances well....and she's married. Damn! Damn! Damn! He considered sneaking off to bed before he could add to his hangover, let his eyes drift toward the doorway, and turned suddenly cold.

Qannechota Two-Feathers stood in the doorway, leaning on the frame - her face was absolutely expressionless, but as pale as shadowed snow. Her eyes roamed over the dancers, and as Kirk watched, she spotted the person she was looking for and raised her hand in a quick, frantic signal.

Kirk watched, the forgotten beer mug halted half-way to his mouth, while Roantree turned and left the dancers, striding unobtrusively to the doorway. He watched, not moving a muscle, while the two women conferred in quick whispers, and he saw Roantree's face lose its exertion-flush and turn white as a sheet. Then both women turned to look straight at him, and both were wearing expressions of pure horror.

They know, he thought, as sober now as if he'd been drinking nothing but ice-water. I don't know how they learned it, but they know. They know it all.

Captain's Log, Stardate 6050.2

QUANNECHOTA TWO-FEATHERS GOT THROUGH SOME OF THE BLOCKS ON THE COMPUTER - DON'T ASK ME HOW - AND LEARNED WHAT HAPPENED IN CHICAGO. SHE TOLD ROANTREE. THEY TOOK ME DOWN TO THEIR CABIN, AND WE SAT DOWN AND HAD A LONG TALK ABOUT IT. QUANNECHOTA ASKED THE TECHNICAL QUESTIONS, ABOUT TIME-TRAVEL AND CHANGING HISTORY AND ALTERNATE UNIVERSES AND SO ON. ROANTREE ASKED THE HISTORICAL QUESTIONS, ABOUT WHAT EARTH'S HISTORY ORIGINALLY WAS, AND WHAT FEDERATION SOCIETY WAS LIKE, AND HOW SCIENCE HAD PROGRESSED. I ANSWERED AS BEST I COULD.... AT LEAST THIS WON'T ENDANGER THE ALLIANCE - QUANNECHOTA DID NOT GET THROUGH ALL THE BLOCKS ON THE COMPUTER AND THEY STILL DON'T KNOW WE'RE NOT ANARCHISTS.

THEY'RE TAKING THIS VERY WELL, VERY CALMLY. A LOT MORE CALMLY THAN I AM. BY THE TIME THE SESSION WAS OVER, I WAS SHAKING LIKE A NUDE IN A BLIZZARD. SHAME OR RELIEF? I DON'T KNOW....

I THINK THEY SAW HOW THE WHOLE BUSINESS HURT - HURTS - ME. BUT THEY DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING. THEY JUST PULLED OUT A BOTTLE OF WHAT PASSES FOR BRANDY IN HIGH HARBOR AND BETWEEN THE THREE OF US WE EMPTIED IT. VILE STUFF. NEEDED THEIR HELP GETTING BACK TO MY CABIN. I THINK ALL THOSE BEERS ARE CATCHING UP TO ME, TOO. DON'T KNOW WHAT THE ANARCHISTS ARE GOING TO DO. TOO TIRED TO THINK, JUST WANT TO SLEEP. HOPE I DON'T DREAM....

Project Tape R-44 Roantree recording.

KIRK BLAMES HIMSELF FOR THE CHANGE - OR SHOULD I SAY HIS PEOPLE BLAMED HIM FOR IT, AND HE ACCEPTED THEIR JUDGEMENT AND HAS BEEN TORTURING HIMSELF EVER SINCE? WE HAVE TO ACCEPT THE FACT THAT HISTORY WENT WRONG SOMEWHERE, THAT THE FAMOUS WAR WITH THE MOON COLONY SHOULD HAVE GONE THE OTHER WAY, THAT SCIENCE SHOULD NEVER HAVE BEEN REJECTED: WE SHOULD HAVE BEEN PART OF A GALAXY-WIDE CIVILIZATION BY NOW! IT'S TOO BIG FOR ME TO COMPREHEND. AS FOR THE IMPLICATIONS, I CAN'T BEGIN TO HANDLE THEM. WE SENT THE INFORMATION TO THE WHEEL AND HIGH HARBOR AFTER WE PUT KIRK TO BED; THEY CAN DEAL WITH IT. I'M GOING TO HAVE ENOUGH TROUBLE EXPLAINING IT TO THE CREW WHEN THEY WAKE UP....

AND WHAT AM I GOING TO DO WITH KIRK? OUR MYSTERIOUS SORCERER TURNS OUT TO BE A MAN WORN DOWN TO THE LAST THREAD. HE CAME STUMBLING INTO OUR ROOM AN HOUR AGO, LOOKING LIKE DEATH WARMED OVER, AND ASKED IF WE HAD ANY CURES FOR CRAMPS AND A HANGOVER. WE FED HIM THE USUAL ASPIRIN AND WATER, AND STRETCHED HIM OUT ON THE BED TO GIVE HIM A THOROUGH RUB-DOWN. THE WAY HE REACTED WHEN SPARKS STARTED RUBBING, YOU'D THINK HE'D NEVER HEARD OF LOMI TECHNIQUE BEFORE. SUCH A YELP OF SURPRISE! THEN AGAIN, CONSIDERING THE GUILT HE'S BEEN LIVING WITH, MAYBE HE EXPECTS EVERYONE TO CONSIDER HIM UNTOUCHABLE....

IT TOOK MORE THAN HALF AN HOUR TO GET HIM COMPLETELY RELAXED. HE WAS SO TENSE ACROSS THE SHOULDERS THAT IT TOOK TWO OF US TO WORK THE CRAMPS OUT, AND HE GROANED LIKE SPLINTERING WOOD WHILE WE WERE DOING IT. AFTERWARDS, HE FELL ASLEEP SO FAST YOU'D THINK WE POLE-AXED HIM. QUANNA INTERPRETS THAT TO MEAN THAT HE'S BEEN PSYCHICALLY "CARRYING THE WEIGHT OF THE WORLD ON HIS SHOULDERS," AND WHEN WE TOOK SOME OF THE WEIGHT OFF, SO TO SPEAK, HE PASSED OUT FROM RELIEF. HE'S GOING TO NEED A LOT OF RECOVERY WORK....

KIRK LOOKS DIFFERENT WHEN HE'S ASLEEP; YOUNGER, OF COURSE, AND SOMEHOW ODDLY FAMILIAR... DO I KNOW HIM FROM SOMEWHERE? ALTERNATE TIME-LINES....PARALLEL-INCIDENTS AND INDIVIDUALS...MAYBE HE'S THE EQUIVALENT OF SOMEBODY I KNOW. ARRGH! THE IMPLICATIONS ARE GETTING TO ME! I'LL FIGURE IT OUT LATER.

Kirk woke sometime in the afternoon and spent several minutes being disoriented before he remembered where he was and what had happened. It was several minutes more before he could summon enough nerve to get up, and get dressed, leave the cabin, and go down to the mess-hall for a late breakfast. The occasional Anarchists he met gave him respectful greetings and wide-eyed stares, and he was relieved to find the mess-hall

empty when he got there. He punched out a quick meal, settled in an unobtrusive spot in a corner table, and wolfed down the ham and eggs with a better appetite than he'd had in months.

He was finishing a second cup of coffee and wondering what to do next when Sparks, Roantree, and Quannechota came in. They smiled and waved to him, selected mugs of beer for themselves, and settled at his table as casually as if they'd been doing it for years.

"How do you feel now?" Roantree began amiably. "Hangover gone?"

"Huh? Oh. Yes, it is." I'll be damned! They - they're actually warming to me, in spite of everything! "That's some hangover cure."

"Cramps gone too?" Sparks asked.

"Sure, no problem." He grinned. "My only complaint is that one of my legs feels a little longer than the other. Just how hard did you pull it, Sparks?"

"Oh, just 'til it twanged a little," Sparks replied, straight-faced. "Did you hear the one about the drunk who was coming home from the party and wandered half-way off the curb?" The women groaned, but Sparks finished the story anyway. Kirk laughed, and counter-attacked with the one about the hungover drunk with the pink dragon on a leash. It was the first joke he'd told in nearly four months. The Anarchists loved it.

There was a pause while the four of them swigged their respective drinks, and then Quannechota took a deep breath and launched into more serious topics. "You know, Kirk," she began, "this new information is already having great effects on us...."

"Uh, yes," Roantree picked up on the cue. "We remember about computers. We remember that machines can't lie. The things your library computer's been showing us, the world that could have been, that should have been...."

"...the technical knowledge, beyond anything we could have dreamed...." Sparks cut in, his face slipping into a look of pure rapture.

"And this ship itself, and your people's community, for proof." Roantree looked thoughtfully into her beer mug. "We've been talking about it since last night, us up here, and the Wheel crew, and High Harbor. It's a lot to swallow all at once, but the information in your computer, and what your people told us...."

"They told?" Kirk cut in, horrified. How much did they say?

"We asked them how many of them there were," Quannechota explained. "They hedged this way and that, but finally admitted that there were only 420 of them. When we told them what you had said about the past, they confirmed it."

"Oh, I see." Only about the Change. Nothing about politics. The alliance is still safe. "Wait a minute; you said 420! The crew was originally 435. Spock and McCoy and Pennington died, and I'm up here. What happened to the other eleven?"

"The PTC agents were executed."

"Oh." Executed.... The crew must have wanted to kill somebody for their loss. I'm lucky it wasn't me.... "Now that our communities are allied, we can start bringing progress back to the world...."

"If there's time!" Roantree snapped. "Kirk, I've seen this from your computer, now I want to hear it from you: Are there truly two Empires out there in space? And pirates? And slavers? And monsters that can eat whole solar systems? Mad machines that can destroy whole planets? Is it true?"

"It's true, Jenneth," said Kirk, looking straight into her hazel eyes. "In my time-line, the Romulans crossed our path a hundred years ago and were defeated; in this time-line, I don't know how far they've come. They might be on the borders of the solar system now. They might raid Earth tomorrow. So could the Klingons, or the Orion slavers. I have no way of knowing where they are, but they're out there somewhere, and sooner or later one or more of them is bound to stumble across Earth."

The Anarchists exchanged a grim, haunted look.

"This will not persuade our neighbors to give up Ludd," said Quannechota. "They simply will not believe it, especially not from us."

"Well, if the slavers from space are coming," said Roantree bitterly, "just how are we going to fight them? Our Luddite neighbors will be no help. It may be centuries before our communities are strong enough to fight two space-empires. What are we going to do?"

"There's still the ship," Kirk offered.

"The future looks pretty grim - one ship against unknown terrors." Roantree took another drink. "The past hasn't been very easy for us, either. Try maintaining a space program with the resources of a single river valley! After a while, the only way we could keep up our hope and our effort was to make our science, and our love of it, our plans for the future, our ethics, and our social needs...and...and worship them! We've been holding onto our science now for many generations against a hostile world, against the Luddites, and...well, what other long-term unifying force could we have besides our science? Science; it's our religion now." She glanced at the marks on her hands. "We believe because we...we have to." She cocked her head to one side. "Kirk, are you sure there's no way the universe could be changed back? There's no way you can set time right again?"

"No," Kirk groaned. "The ship's dilithium crystals are weak - I don't know how long they'll last - and they can't take us around the sun at the necessary speed to travel backward in time."

"What is the source of dilithium crystals?" Quannechota cut in. "Can they be found anywhere on Earth?"

"No, they're quite rare. We don't even have the power to reach the few planets where dilithium crystals are found. It's an insoluble problem, as Spock used to say." God, how I miss him.

Captain's Log, Stardate 6053.7

WHY ARE THEY SO INTENT ON WHAT HAPPENED IN CHICAGO? RELIGIOUS PECULIARITIES, I SUPPOSE. QUANNECHOTA'S BEEN WORKING THE COMPUTER HEAVILY FOR THE PAST THREE DAYS - DILITHIUM CRYSTALS - THEIR SOURCE AND PROCESSING. IT WON'T DO HER MUCH GOOD, BUT IT'S AN INTERESTING SIGN OF HOW THEIR THOUGHTS ARE RUNNING....

I THINK SOMETHING IMPORTANT IS HAPPENING ON THE GROUND. THE ANARCHISTS WON'T SAY WHAT IT IS, EXCEPT THAT IT HAS NOTHING TO DO WITH THE ALLIANCE. THEY'RE ACTING TENSE AND WORRIED, AND THE COMMUNICATIONS BOARD HAS BEEN ALMOST TOO BUSY.

THEY'RE COMING BACK ONTO THE BRIDGE. I'D BETTER CUT THIS OFF AND GO GET SOME LUNCH. KIRK OUT.

Roantree waited until Kirk was safely in the turbo-lift, then turned to Sparks and said, "All right, call 'em."

Sparks wordlessly opened the ship-to-ground frequency, and set the screen for a one-mile-up scan of High Harbor. It only took a moment to make the connection.

"Roantree to Central. Zack, are you there?"

"Central to Roantree. No, this is Tilda. Zack got it this morning."

"What? How bad? How did it happen?"

"I'm afraid he's dead, Jenneth. The raid's gotten through the perimeter at four places, and it's into the town. We've turned out everyone we can spare, shut down the school.... The fighting's still going on, with no signs of slacking. They're pouring in steadily, and a big wave's coming straight down Washtenaw Avenue. It's war, Jenneth. Real war."

"Lord of Light," Roantree said, sinking into the command chair. "Can you hold them off the campus?"

"We honestly don't know, Jen."

"Tilda," Quannechota cut in. "I find it disturbing that the Luddites should choose this particular time for a massive attack. Do you have any indication of their reasons for this timing?"

"Uh, yeah." Tilda's distant voice was unmistakably reluctant. "We took a few prisoners, and they were willing to talk. They were swearing down fire and brimstone on us for even daring to think of - of changing history."

"How did they know?" Roantree thundered.

"Sad to say, there must have been a spy or two in our midst. We think it was the Dexter people, but we're not sure. Too late to worry about that now, anyway."

"May the Sun strike them blind!" Roantree snarled. "Didn't those idiots hear us say there was no way to do it? Kirk made that plain enough. Even if we wanted to, we can't!"

"Maybe they just didn't care. They had their excuse, and that's all that matters. They've been wanting to do this for a long time. It looks like the discovery of the Enterprise, and the secret of history, was all that was needed to pull in every Science-hating Luddite yahoo in the surrounding five counties!"

"Dammit, Tilda, you've got to hold them off! If they get to the launching ground, we'll be marooned up here!"

"I know it! We all know it! And that's just what they're trying to do! That's why they've hauled in so many people into this - from Dearborn, and beyond!"

"Wonderful," said Roantree bitterly. "They were so afraid we'd bring Science back into the world that they've brought back War."

"That's about the size of it. I can't talk long; we may need this channel soon. Jen, is there any way the ship could fight for us?"

"Not unless you want to burn down the whole valley. Kirk might know something we could do. Goddammit, why won't you let me tell him the whole story?"

"Jen, we're still not sure of him! A man from another universe - another time-line - how alien can you get? We haven't made up our minds about him yet."

"How long will it take? 'Til the whole valley's burned out?"

"After this crisis we'll probably come to a fast decision on him, but the fighting's our main concern right now. I've got to clear this board. I'll call back if anything comes up. Central out - and good luck."

Static crackle ended the transmission.

"Oh hell," said Roantree, leaning back in the chair. "Sparks, can you get that picture closer and show us how the fighting's going?"

"I think so." Sparks bent over the board, his huge fingers turning dials and caressing buttons with infinite care and delicacy. The view on the screen swooped to a close-up of a deserted street, then began to move sideways, looking for the war.

At that moment, the turbo-lift doors whooshed open and Kirk walked onto the bridge, holding a nearly-finished cup of coffee. Roantree jumped a little as she saw him.

"Hey, Roantree," Kirk said amiably. "Out of my chair."

"What? Oh. All right." Roantree got up, feeling oddly guilty, and settled at the Engineering console. Kirk turned to look at her, wondering if this were the right time to ask questions.

"I must say I'm flattered," he began cautiously. "Your people are having a wonderful time with my ship. Everywhere I go, they waylay me with questions and theories and invitation to small parties. I'm a little bewildered by all the attention."

"You ought to expect that by now," said Roantree, flicking surreptitious glances at the viewscreen and giving him less than half her attention. "It's our way of being friendly. Besides, there's just so much to learn up here...."

"Understandable, but I wish somebody would give me some information for a change."

"Such as?" Roantree asked, worried. How much does he know?

"Such as...." Find out how they're organized, learn how to get them used to structure, government, some kind of Federation system.... "Well, for instance, how do you run your ship? You're called the Co-ordinator; does that mean that you, er, make all the decisions for the ship and its crew?"

"No, not at all!" Roantree tried not to look relieved. "I just decide on things where people's jobs overlap, or when there's an emergency and there isn't time for a full meeting. If we have enough time, we always talk things over in full council." Odd thing to ask. Doesn't he know? "How do your people do it?" Big ship, big crew.... Their full meetings must be huge, cumbersome. They probably have a better "shorthand" method....

"Uh, well, we do something similar, but a little more formal," Kirk hedged. "We usually have a full crew of 435. We can't stop and hold a, uhm, town meeting every time there's a problem to deal with, especially in an emergency. Usually things happen too fast for that, so we just, uh, have a meeting of the section specialists."

"We do that too," said Roantree. "In a real pinch, they trust me to do the deciding, but we talk it over afterwards."

"Oh, yes, I sort of do - did that, too." But what does she base her authority on? "Roantree," he chose his words carefully. "Please remember that I am a stranger here, and I don't understand all your customs, so I can't draw too many conclusions for myself, and...."

"Apology accepted in advance," Roantree grinned. "I'll take care not to be offended." There! Some fighting in the streets.... Keep Kirk's attention away from the screen! "Ask away."

"All right. Why should your crew...your people, ah, when you give them, uh, instructions - well, why should they follow them? Why should they listen to you instead of doing what they want?"

"You mean, why do they do what I say?" So now we come to it! He likes us, but he has to find out if we're really Free People or just faking, as the Luddites accuse. He wonders if I might be a...a Boss! "Fair question, Kirk, and no insult taken. The answer's expertise. My people listen to me because they know, they've seen, that I'm good at my job. Hell, they tried me out, in public nine ways from Sundown before they accepted me for this project and let me buy my share of the ship."

"Buy the ship?"

"The builders owned it, of course; they sold it to the crew - those who weren't crew already. I paid five good blood-horses and a whole herd of cattle for my share."

"Oh." Horses and cattle for a spaceship!

"So before they'd sell me a share, they tested me out. I had to show them that I was a good pilot and a good co-ordinator. They were so pleased with me, I must say, that they reduced the price for me. I didn't have to give them any land. My home's still mine...." If it hasn't been burned yet.... Great Mother! I can see one of the construction docks burning - how close have they gotten to the launching field? "Expertise," she hurried on, "shows I won't steer them wrong. They trust my skill, so they trust me on the job. Somebody has to do the co-ordinating and I'm good at it, so...."

"They trust your skill," Kirk repeated, understanding all too well. There was a time when my crew trusted me like that.... "Roantree, what happens if you make a mistake?"

"Then I lose my job, provided anyone lives to boot me out...." Oops! Stupid! That was a cruel thing to say, especially to him! Explain, dammit! "Of course, I do my best not to make mistakes - nobody wants to screw it up with other peoples' lives - nobody!"

"No, nobody does," Kirk agreed, rubbing his eyes, "But people aren't infallible. Sooner or later the sky falls...."

"True. All I can do is keep tight watch on myself - even tighter than the others do - and pray that when I finally do blow it, I'll shoot down nobody but myself. You know, one of the first things I learned when I took pilot's training was the old 'Co-ordinator's Prayer.'"

"I could use a prayer like that." I could have used it three months and 200 years ago.

"It's short - and simple. I could quote it in my sleep. Probably do." Great Mother, they've gotten onto the launching field! There's nothing I can do - keep Kirk's attention! Quote, dammit, quote!

"Lord of Light, when my number comes up,
when the Great Unknown
deals me the Ace of Spades,
be it all my own.
Give me the courage to face my death alone.
Let none I care for suffer or die for me.
Bright Sun, as moves my will, so mote it be."

"It's a...a good prayer," said Kirk, very quietly, clutching his hands on the arms of the chair. But the whole Federation died.... Jenneth, what would you have done? He looked up at her and saw that she was staring past him to the screen, and on her face was the same look that he'd seen on his own for the last three months. He spun around and looked at the screen.

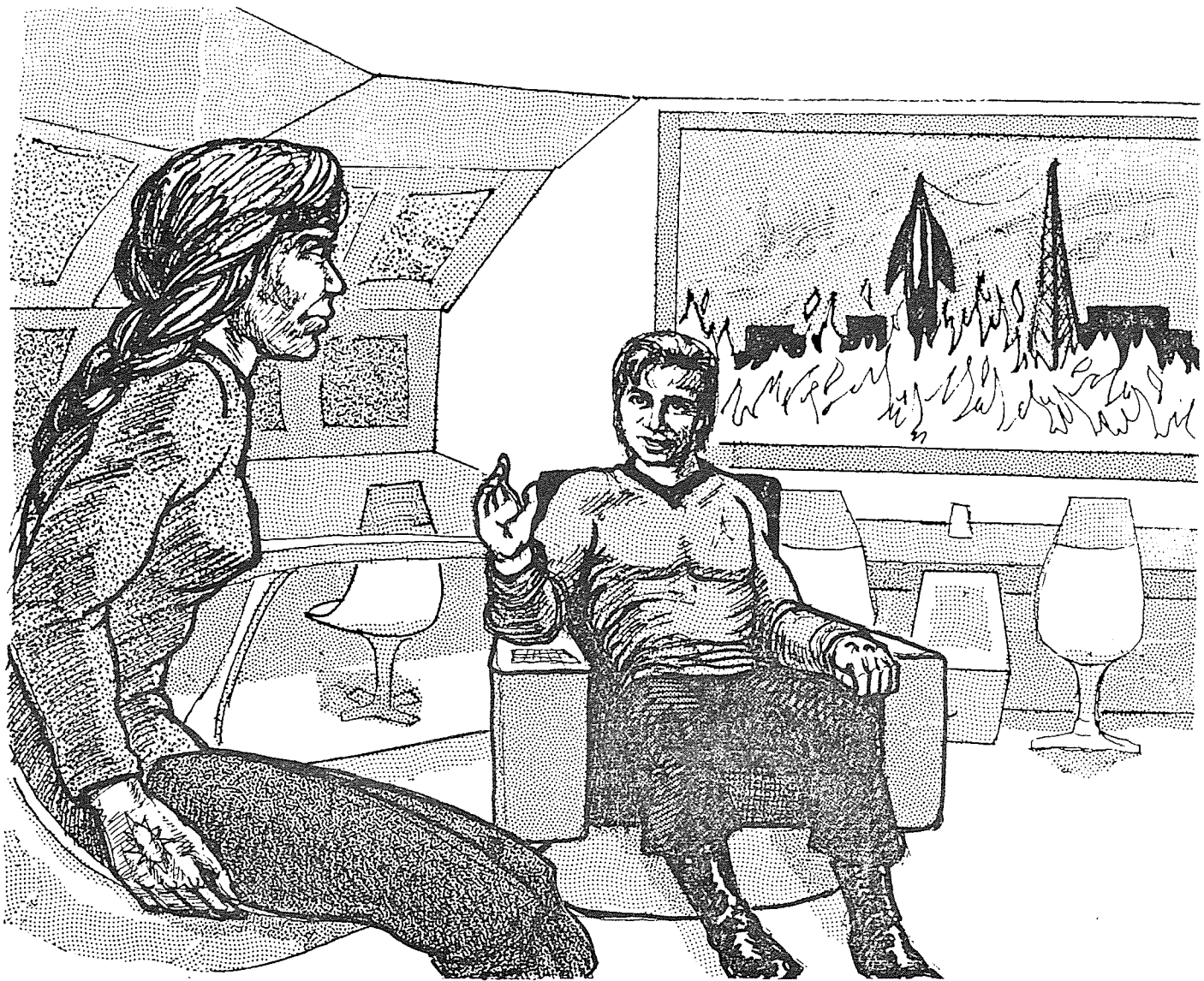
The launching field was in flames. Lakes of fire, burning liquid fuel, surrounding charred island buildings - pylons, cranes, and a half-completed rocket. At this range they could see the metal glowing, softening, melting slowly in the heat. It was unmistakably a scene of ruin and death, sketched in hundred-foot flames.

"Jenneth," he asked quietly. "Just what's happening down there?"

"The launching field is burning," she replied through stiff lips. "We're marooned up here. All of us."

"But why? How? Who's doing it?"

"King Ludd's minions!" Jenneth pounded her fist on the console. "It's a raid, Kirk. A big one...."



No! Don't tell him too much.... "We have these little problems with our neighbors. Those bastards have gotten pretty bold-assed lately." She tried to flash him a tough, reassuring grin. It failed.

On the screen, a melting pylon fell. It crashed onto a rocket's hull, breaking it. In the foreground, firefighters wrestled with a high-pressure hose, aiming its foot-thick stream at the root of the flames. As they watched, Kirk and Jenneth saw a sudden explosion light the sky, and a curtain of fire descended over the people and the hose.

"Shit!" Jenneth bellowed. "Sparks, open the channel to Central!"

She glanced at Kirk while Sparks spun dials, her face gone pale and grim. "No ordinary raid, Kirk," she admitted, getting up from Engineering and going to Sparks' station.

"Wait," Kirk forestalled her as he got out of the command chair. "Over here. Press this button." He pointed to one of the controls on the chair arm. He leaned over the other arm, and they both stared at each other for a second, neither of them quite willing to sit down. Static crackle came from the speakers.

"Roantree to Central," Jenneth snapped, looking in the direction of the speakers. "Roantree to Central, Tilda, answer me! We saw them burning the launching field - what's happening down there? Answer me, dammit! Over!"

Tilda's answer came through a maelstrom of cries and crashings and confused indefinable sounds. "Clear the board, Jenneth! We need it! Get off the goddam board!"

"Tell me what's happening!"

"They're burning the library," Tilda screamed back. "Two-pronged attack - they burned the field, broke through on Washtenaw; and now they're burning the library! Get off the board!"

"Lord of Light! The library!" Roantree spun to face Sparks. "Cut the transmission, Sparks! Find the library!"

Sparks jabbed and spun dials, and the picture on the screen whipped down the street like a running pedestrian following a street map. It turned sharp left at a corner and swept over a smoke-veiled expanse of lawn, coming to rest at a huge red-brick structure with tall, mismatched wings. Smoke rolled out through broken windows and leaked from behind barricaded doors. Flames shot from the lower-floor windows and appeared like flitting figures on the second floor. Someone on the bridge gave a thin eerie wail, like an ancient mourner's keening.

Roantree swore furiously in some language other than English, shot out a hand, and grabbed Kirk by the shoulder. "Kirk, is there any way this ship can put out that fire? Think hard, for Sun's sake! That's our world, burning!"

Kirk thought fast. "The transporter! Is there a river or lake somewhere near here?"

"The Huron - north - Sparks, find the river!"

The view on the screen swept cross-country, high over houses and low over trees, pausing at last over a broad, sluggish river.

"There," said Kirk. "Get the coordinates. Feed them to the transporter..." he stopped, seeing their uncomprehending looks. "Damn! Move over!" He ran to the communications console, pushed Sparks out of the way, and worked the range-finder until it read out the coordinates for the river, then shifted the screen back to the burning library (flames climbing the third floor now), and picked up the coordinates for that. He started to signal down to the transporter room, swore, scribbled the coordinates on a desk-pad and ran for the turbo-lift.

"Coordinates?" said Sparks as the turbo-lift doors closed. "I didn't even know where to find them...." He looked at his hands and fell silent.

"Fucking...stupid...helpless...." Roantree whispered through clenched teeth, beating her fist slowly on the back of the chair.

"You were right," Quannechota said. "We should have trusted him from the beginning. He might have shown us...."

There was nothing more to say. The three sat, looking at the screen, watching the library burn, raging silently at their helplessness and the shame of knowing that this could have been prevented. While they watched, a broad shimmering appeared in the air above the library. The shimmer resolved into a floating, shining, thick cylinder of water, suspended magically above the burning building. The shimmering faded and the water dropped - falling like a water fall on the library, sweeping in a ragged flood down the walls, storming over the flames, and inevitably breaking through the roof. Before the last of the water had spilled down the sides, a second column of water shimmered into existence above the roof. The three watched, slack-jawed, while the sparkles faded and the second flood solidified, and dropped. This time it all went into the building, blasting out the windows, knocking down the doors, putting out the fire.

"That's enough," Quannechota said, the first to find her voice. "Tell him to stop! Any more water could destroy the building."

Roantree reached automatically for her personal talkie, then caught herself and began punching buttons on the chair arm, hoping that one of them would reach Kirk. "Stop it, Kirk," she shouted at all of them. "Stop it! That's enough! The fire's out!"

One of the buttons was the right one. Kirk's voice came back. "All right. I'll be up in a minute."

Roantree took her hands off the mysterious buttons and backed away from the console, feeling oddly like the Sorcerer's Apprentice. "We've got to ask him what a 'transporter' is," she announced, trying to get the others back to normal. Her voice trailed off as she realized that neither of the others was listening.

When Kirk came back on the bridge the others turned and stared at him with something close to religious awe on their faces. It startled him. "Citizen Kirk," said Quannechota unsteadily. "You must show us what a 'transporter' is. We have never seen anything like that before."

"...uh, yeah," Sparks agreed, standing up also. "And how do you get coordinates on that?"

Kirk glanced at the screen, saw the soaked and fireless library, and realized that they must have seen the whole thing. He wondered what they had thought on seeing a transporter work for the first time. "Oh sure. Come on, I'll take you back to the transporter room and explain it." As he escorted the shaggy communications expert and the impressed Indian woman to the turbo-lift, he tossed a look over his shoulder and saw that Roantree was staring after him. The turbo-lift door shut.

Alone on the bridge, Roantree dropped into the command chair with a sigh, studied the buttons for a moment, and pressed the one that had previously connected her with the ground station. She held her breath, wondering if Sparks had left the channel available, until a crackle of static assured her that he had.

"Who's that?" said Tilda's strained and too-slow voice.

"It's me, Roantree, from the magic boat. How's the war?"

"Changed...changed...." Tilda sounded shell-shocked. "They...they panicked, broke and ran, when they saw the Mircale...the main army turned and ran. The rest are sinking without support - the tide's turned, and we're pushing them back. Nobody wants to fight against something like that - a miracle - we've lived to see one. I never...never really believed in them but now...."

"What miracle?" Roantree asked, half-guessing what Tilda meant.

"The sky opened above the library. There was a flashing like stars, and then there was a column of water hanging in the air - just hanging in the middle of the air."

"I see." It was impressive enough from here!

"Then the water fell like a flood - and put out the fire."

"I know. I saw it from here. Kirk did it."

"What?" Tilda's voice snapped back to its normal clarity. "Kirk? Explain."

"Is the Faculty Committee there?"

"No, still busy with the war. I'll tape the message for them, if you like."

"I like. I also want their opinion as soon as I can get it. And some suggestion on what the Sunfire and the Wheel are going to do for supplies now. Also...Tilda, when you have time, would you give us the battle reports."

"Yes, and yes, and yes. Tape on. Give me your message."

Roantree gave a brief, concise description of what she'd seen from the Enterprise's bridge, signed off, then leaned back in the command chair and began to brood.

Project Tape R-51, Roantree recording.

WE'RE STRANDED UP HERE; ALL OF US. KIRK'S FOOD MACHINES CAN LAST INDEFINITELY - HE COULD PROBABLY FEED THE WHEEL'S CREW BY MEANS OF HIS TRANSPORTER AFTER THEIR FOOD RUNS OUT - BUT WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO NOW? THE MOON MISSION'S A DEAD ISSUE AND ALL THAT FINE MINING EQUIPMENT IN THE SUNFIRE'S HOLD MIGHT AS WELL BE RUST.

I'M GOING TO HAVE TO TELL KIRK EVERYTHING, AS I SHOULD HAVE DONE A WEEK AGO. SCREW THE TOWN'S PARANOIA! IT'S MY RESPONSIBILITY AND MY CREW!

Kirk was getting ready for bed when Roantree came to his cabin. He wasn't surprised to see her; the battle had obviously put a crimp in the Anarchists' plans and their future dealings would necessarily have a place for him. He invited her in, offered a chair, and was a little surprised to see her pull off her headband. There was some meaning to that gesture, but he didn't know what it was.

"Kirk, we haven't been telling you the whole truth," Roantree came straight to the point. "High Harbor is no where as big or as powerful as we led you to believe."

"I see. The battle did some serious damage, didn't it?"

"It did. We haven't begun to get the damage reports yet, but from just what we saw on your viewscreens, we can tell that the launching field is completely gutted. High Harbor can't send us any more supplies and we can't go back down. We're marooned up here, Kirk."

"Oh." Kirk felt a stab of sympathy for the Anarchist captain, shot through with a guilty joy at the thought that now they'd have to stay with him, maybe permanently. "I'm sorry, Jenneth. I wish I could have done more."

"You saved the library - most of it, anyway. We should have told you earlier, told you everything. Maybe we could have planned something before the attack. As I said, High Harbor never was as strong as we let you think. Ever since the fall of science, we've been going downhill. High Harbor used to have three times the population it does now.... There used to be other places that tried to hold on - D'troyt, Yps'lani, E'lan.... We had trade and communication lines with all of them. One by one they fell. We're the last. We had more reasons than just pride for wanting to go to the moon. We can't live on Earth anymore; we've been losing ground steadily, and losing people. The space program was our hope for survival."

"You mean you were planning to set up a colony - move all your people to the moon?"

"In another fifty years we would have made it - with luck. It was a race against time, Kirk, and we lost."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Because we need your help." She raised her eyes to his. "We were hit very badly by this attack - High Harbor is no longer viable. We're going to have to emigrate, take everything we can with us, find another place to live. The ideal location is with your people, Kirk. Do you think they'll be willing to have us?"

"Jenneth, I think they'd be honored."

Roantree gave a long sigh and leaned back in her chair, the lines of tension smoothing out of her face. "But that leads to problem number two - getting there. Could you use your transporter to move our people, our equipment and so on, the thousand miles to your settlement?"

"I could, but...."

"But what?"

"The outlay of power - the strain might be enough to drain the dilithium crystals completely."

"I know. That's why I wanted to talk to you privately before I gave this idea to the Cannibal Wheel or High Harbor. Can your computer tell how much power the crystals can take, and how much it would cost to move our people out?"

"Of course. How soon will you know how much we'd have to transport?"

Roantree shrugged. "Sometime soon. I'll let you know as soon as I hear. I'll tell Quannechota what to expect. She'll know how to...what's the word? 'Program?'"

"Right. You people learn fast."

"I hope the rest of your people will consider that an asset." She tossed him a sweeping hand gesture that might have been a salute, and went out.

There was a second, quieter knock on the door.

Captain's Log, Stardate 6054.1

QUANNECHOTA CAME IN SHORTLY AFTER JENNETH LEFT. I THOUGHT SHE'D COME TO DISCUSS THE PROGRAMMING FOR THE TRANSPORTATION PROBLEM, SO I TOLD HER EVERYTHING I COULD ABOUT IT. SHE DIDN'T SAY A WORD, BUT STARTED ASKING ME ABOUT DILITHIUM CRYSTALS - ESPECIALLY THEIR HISTORY, WHEN AND WHERE THEY WERE FIRST DISCOVERED, AND SO ON. I NEVER WAS WELL-INFORMED ON THE SUBJECT, COULDN'T ANSWER HER VERY MUCH, BUT SHE SEEMED SATISFIED WITH WHAT I TOLD HER.

THEN SHE BEGAN ASKING ABOUT WHAT HAD HAPPENED IN CHICAGO. SHE WANTED DETAILS. THE QUESTIONS HURT, AND I TOLD HER SO. SHE JUST RAISED ONE EYEBROW AND GAVE ME A LONG, UNNERVING STARE. THEN CAME MORE QUESTIONS ABOUT ALTERNATE HISTORIES, PARTICULARLY ABOUT THE 'LEVELING FLOW' OF TIME-LINES, THE LIKELIHOOD OF THE SAME INDIVIDUALS SHOWING UP, AND SO ON. I COULDN'T BEGIN TO ANSWER. SHE LOST ME COMPLETELY WHEN SHE GOT INTO THE PHILOSOPHICAL QUESTION OF IDENTITY. I'M AFRAID I LOST MY TEMPER A LITTLE - SHE APOLOGIZED STIFFLY AND WALKED OUT.

WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT ALL ABOUT?

Roantree walked onto the bridge, settled in the command chair, and told Sparks to contact High Harbor. Ann Bailey and Quannechota, who had been engrossed with the computer, sat up and took note. The call went through quickly; Tilda had been waiting for them.

"Jenneth, the casualty report is bad, very bad. Your sorcerer friend saved part of the library, but we lost damned near everything else. The launching field, most of the labs, nearly two-thirds of the town buildings - face it, the town's gutted. We can't stay."

"Go on," said Roantree, holding her voice rock-steady. "Tell us the rest of it."

"We lost big chunks of the library; all of the material on the first and second floors in all three wings. That's half the technical section and most of the histories."

"Lord of Light!"

"And the casualties - Jenneth, I don't know how to soften this. We lost half our people...."

"Oh, God...."

"That's not the worst, though."

"How in hell could it be worse?"

"Jenneth, listen to me. When the battle started we closed the schools and took the children to the safest places we could reach on such short notice. They...a lot of them were hiding in the library...."

"No!"

"I'm afraid so. The Luddites barricaded the doors before they set the fire, and...."

"How many dead? How many?"

"187 children, six teachers, nine librarians, and...Jenneth, we've got the list of names, and...."

"Whose from the Sunfire?" Roantree asked, very quietly, her fingers digging into the arms of the chair. "Whose kids, Tilda?"

"Five from your crew," said Tilda, trying to keep her voice steady. "Alex Goldman, Emma Bergman, Elizabeth Bailey...."

The chief mechanic of the Sunfire quietly collapsed on the deck. Quannechota caught her and gently eased her down.

"...January Vanderhoof...."

Quannechota looked up in time to see Sparks reel backward against the console as if he'd been clubbed.

"...and Cassandra Roantree."



"Lord of Light," Roantree whispered, closing her eyes tight.

"Jen, I'm sorry."

"Our kids, all of them...."

"I wish there was something I could do, or say...."

"Nothing, nothing," Roantree raised one stiff hand and punched the communication button to silence.

When Kirk came on the bridge an hour later he found them seated in a ragged huddle around the command chair, passing a nearly-emptied bottle of brandy from hand to hand in total silence, staring at the star-studded sky on the viewscreen.

"What's happening?" he asked. "You look as if you're attending a wake."

"We are," said Roantree.

"Oh." Kirk turned crimson, muttered, "I'm sorry," and marched right back into the turbo-lift.

Ann Bailey raised her head and snarled at the closing doors.

"No, it isn't his fault," Roantree forestalled her. "He was just an excuse. If he hadn't been here, the Luddites would've found something else."

"Do children die like that in his universe?" asked Sparks bitterly. "All for the sake of a dee-lithium crystal....?"

"Perhaps...." murmured Quannechota.

"Perhaps what?"

No answer.

"Perhaps what, Quanna?" Roantree insisted.

"I...I was thinking of something I learned from the computer," Quannechota's reply was reluctant.

"Tell it."

Quanna told.

Project Tape R-52, Roantree recording.

I CAN UNDERSTAND WHY QUANNA DIDN'T WANT TO TELL ABOUT IT UNTIL AFTER WE GOT THE CASUALTY REPORT - WE'VE LOST TOO MUCH! OUR CHANCES OF SURVIVAL ARE TOO POOR. WHATEVER COMES OF THIS, LET IT FALL ON MY SHOULDERS; I MADE QUANNA TELL, AND I PASSED IT ON TO THE OTHERS. THEY'LL DEBATE FOR THE NEXT SEVERAL DAYS, I EXPECT...."

WE CAN'T TELL KIRK - IT'S OBVIOUS WHAT HIS REACTION WOULD BE. BESIDES, I DON'T WANT TO SEE HIM HURT ANY MORE THAN HE'S BEEN HURT ALREADY. I LIKE HIM - HE'S STRANGELY FAMILIAR - AT TIMES I CAN GUESS WHAT HE'S THINKING AND FEELING, SO WELL THAT I MIGHT AS WELL BE READING HIS MIND...EXCEPT THAT I HAVE VERY LITTLE OF THE GIFT. DAMN! I DO KNOW HIM FROM SOMEWHERE!

AT FULL SHIP'S MEETING THIS MORNING WE TALKED IT OVER, DID SOME THEORIZING, MADE SOME SUGGESTIONS - ALL OF WHICH BOIL DOWN TO "FIND OUT MORE." THEY'VE CHARGED ME WITH A CERTAIN PART OF THAT FINDING, AND I'M NOT SURE WHETHER I'M GOING TO ENJOY IT, OR NOT...."

Kirk was in his cabin with the lights turned down, getting ready for sleep. He'd just pulled off his boots when the rapping sounded on the door. He opened it and wasn't surprised to see Roantree enter.

"I hope I'm not keeping you up," she said, settling into a chair. "Trouble is, I've got something to talk about that really can't wait until morning...." She rubbed the bridge of her nose and looked away for a moment. It was the first time Kirk had ever seen her looking indecisive. "High Harbor's in Full Meeting, day and night," she said. "There are some things that they want to know, as soon as might be."

"Ask away," said Kirk, sitting next to her.

"Look," Roantree said, turning back to face him. "For one thing, there's some question over...I don't know quite how to put this. Dammit - we can't tell if it's true or not that people survive - I mean, if they're the same people from universe to universe, when they change time-lines. I take it that when time changes people had different memories, different histories, never knowing that it was ever any different - except maybe in dreams...."

"True, but they are the same people...."

"As if souls were truly immortal," Roantree murmured, glancing up at the ceiling. "It all fits, fits so perfectly...."

"Fits what, Jenneth?"

"A lot of old ideas," Jenneth continued, rubbing the sunburst tattoo on her hand. "We believe in reincarnation, you know - it's the only life-after-death theory that ever made much sense to us - but we also believe that the life you're born into is the life you deserve."

"Uh, yes, I've heard that theory before."

"You have? All right then, you can see how your parallel time-lines fit into that, can't you?"

"I think so. You mean your people think that, uh, heaven and hell are just alternate universes, or alternate time-lines?"

"You got it," Roantree looked down at the marks on the backs of her hands. "Now that raises the question of just what kind of universe this is."

"Oh."

"All around us, Ludd triumphant, sweeping us away like leaves before the wind. Ludd's minions joyfully smashing our city, killing our friends, our children...." She clenched her fists and looked up at the ceiling again. "And out there, a thousand dangers...coming towards Earth to destroy the last of humanity...." She gave him a tight grin. "Sure looks like hell, doesn't it?"

"Wait...wait a minute!" Kirk yelped, seeing where this was leading. "This universe isn't all that bad, and mine wasn't any paradise. We had our problems...."

"Yes, but you could handle them, couldn't you? Isn't it true that people live longer in your time-line than in mine?"

"Yes, but...."

"And people can be cured of diseases that we can't cure?"

"Well, that's true, but...."

"People live in your time-line that die in ours."

"I guess so."

"Then it's a better time-line than ours." Roantree clenched her fists and looked away. People are alive there who have already died in ours. Jan...Cassie.... "We'd like to live there."

"So would I, but dammit, there's no way!"

"Well, that's not the only thing bothering us. We also have to deal with the emigration problem. It turns out we won't have to use the ship's power to move a lot of people and gear. We'll want you to transport the remains of the library collection, but we'll manage the rest ourselves. Once we get a hundred miles south, nobody will recognize us anyway, and we'll be able to travel easily."

"Thank God! I don't mean to sound selfish, but the ship...."

"The ship is as valuable to us as it is to you. For one thing, how else can we feed my crew and the Can-nibal Wheel once our supplies run out? Your transporter, of course!"

"You mean you're going on with your space program?"

"Why pull them out of the sky, Kirk? The Wheel can keep on snagging space-trash, maybe build another ship...with your people's help, who knows what we can do?"

"Your people are...awfully brave, Jenneth."

"The big problem is compatibility between our settlements," Roantree went on. "We expect to have our differences, of course; we've seen some odd customs recorded in your computer banks, about the way society worked in your time-line, and I suppose it's still the same for your people's settlement."

"Uh, yes, pretty much...."

"But I think the differences can be overcome." She grinned and took off her headband and began untying her braids. "As I told High Harbor, living around you for the past few weeks has showed me much. We're compatible enough, I think...."

"I hope so."

"I believe I know you pretty well," she said, looking at him side-long as she combed out the hair with her fingers. "There's something damned familiar about you. I could swear I'd met you somewhere before."

Kirk shivered, wondering if he'd finally learn who she was, or should have been. "I've been thinking the same thing, myself," he ventured. "If the same people show up in different time-lines...I'm sure I've met you there, in that other time-line, or your double, but I can't remember where, or when, or how."

"We might be related," Roantree considered. "I have some relatives named Kirk, living in Iowa. That's probably where I've seen you, or your double. I can't recall any cousin James, offhand, but it's a large family."

"So's mine," Kirk said. Maybe I should trace my family tree on the computer tomorrow.

"My cousin, the time-traveler," Roantree laughed. She glanced at Kirk's stockinged feet, shrugged, and began pulling off her own boots. "So, I trust you, but understand that a lot of my people still have their doubts." She dumped her boots on the deck and rubbed her toes. "They still mistrust you...even those who've had a chance to observe you awhile. I must admit, they have some grounds for reasonable doubts." The joints of her toes creaked as she rubbed them.

"Such as?" Kirk felt unaccountably annoyed, though he knew he had no right to be. Maybe it was her unnerving informality; she seemed to think nothing of dropping in on him at late hours and not only letting her hair down (hah!), but taking her boots off as well. What next? Her shirt?

"Well, you've answered us honestly on everything we've asked you about, but there are those who say you're keeping things back, just not telling us everything."

Kirk winced.

"Of course, you couldn't be expected to tell us everything about a whole universe in just a week or two. Still, there's something that's shown up time and time again, in your own ways, and in things the computer shows us. Your customs differ from ours in one noticeable way."

Oh, oh. Have they begun to suspect we're not Anarchists?

And then, sure enough, Roantree took off her shirt. She was wearing nothing under it except a kerchief-cloth halter held in place by a solitary button. It took Kirk some effort not to jump right out of his chair. She grinned mischievously at him.

"Why are you and your people so terribly formal, Kirk? Don't your people ever relax? How can people live that way?" Her smile had turned open and frankly curious. Perhaps the shirt-removal had meant nothing more than a dramatization of her questions.

"Uh, different towns, different customs," Kirk backpedalled, trying to keep from acting flustered, trying to find a reasonable answer to a simple anthropological question, and trying to keep his eyes off the big breasts straining that halter. "Different customs - crowding, mostly. Our universe is more thickly populated than yours, and with thousands of different societies...we, ah, try to get along without irritating each other, without rubbing each other the wrong way. We go out of our way to be, uh, formal...actually we're just trying to be polite. In a crowded universe, you have to give people some personal distance, not crowd too close." Goddammit, woman, put your shirt back on! You're making it hard to think straight!

"Yes, that makes sense," Roantree considered, thoughtfully rubbing her jaw, which sent a faint ripple across her bulging chest. "Still, it seems a fairly cold and lonely way to live...." She looked up, caught Kirk's badly-hidden expression, and raised both eyebrows. Lonely....of course! Just look at him! "Kirk," she asked gently. "How long have you been up here, pacing your rounds through an empty ship?"

"Three months." Through summer's end and early autumn, alone.

"Three months, with no one to talk to? No one to visit you?"

"Nobody." Stop it, Jenneth. Please stop here. No more.

"I'm surprised the loneliness didn't kill you."

"It almost did," he blurted.

"There are some who say," Roantree said, very carefully, very quickly, "that you can't be entirely like our people, because a season of solitary confinement should have driven you more than half mad."

Kirk clenched his hands in his lap, suddenly and chillingly afraid. "Jenneth, I...." His voice was getting away from him. "Oh God, what if it did?" How would I know? What if....

And then he had to move, do something, or else come apart at the seams. He all but jumped out of his chair, paced five quick steps across the cabin, and leaned on the cool metal screen that divided the front room from the sleeping area. He could feel his heart pounding as if he'd spent the last half-hour running up and down the corridors. Please, please, don't let it be true.... It could be.... Dear God....

"If so, then it's easily cured." Roantree's voice was calm and kindly and practical.

Kirk turned to look at her, and saw that she'd taken off her socks. Her ankles were hairy. As he watched, she unbuttoned her halter, and her freed breasts jumped at him. His mouth went dry.

"J-jenneth, what are you doing?" This is too much!

"I'm trying to seduce you, of course," she answered reasonably, her hands moving to her wide-buckled belt. "One of the best cures I know for loneliness. Good for sensory deprivation, too. So even if they're right, and you are more than a little out-of-it," she tossed him a wide, warm, cheerful, lusty grin, "you won't be when I'm through with you!" She pulled off her black denim pants. They seemed to take forever sliding past the flaring curve of her hips.

Kirk had absolutely nothing more to say. His pulse was pounding high in his throat, and almost painfully in his groin. Roantree walked calmly up to him, planted her hand on his chest, and gave a gentle push. He stumbled backwards. She paced after him and pushed again. The third push sent him sprawling across the bed. She sat down beside him and fumbled with his shirt.

"How do you get this damned thing off?" she asked.

He showed her, and then her hands slid down to his belt and his hands climbed her arms until they could close over those big pale-apricot cannonball-sized breasts, and then all coherent thought fled and stayed away for a long, long, time.

Captain's Log, Stardate 6055.4

I STILL DON'T BELIEVE IT. I CAN'T BELIEVE I DID ALL THAT. SHE RODE ME LIKE A BRONCO-BUSTER FOR WHAT SEEMED LIKE HOURS, AND I COULDN'T SEEM TO STOP AND IT MUST HAVE BEEN A HALF-DOZEN TIMES - DELETE THAT. I'VE BEEN ALONE UP HERE FOR THREE MONTHS.

SHE SEEMED PUZZLED WHEN WE WOKE UP; SHE KEPT LOOKING AT ME AS IF SHE WERE TRYING TO UNRAVEL A MYSTERY. I CAN UNDERSTAND THAT. THE EERIE FAMILIARITY IS TEN TIMES STRONGER IN BED. I KNOW THOSE RESPONSES FROM SOMEWHERE, AND SHE KNOWS MINE. WHERE COULD SHE HAVE LEARNED ABOUT THE SENSITIVE STREAK OVER MY RIBS, OR THE TENDER SPOT LOW IN THE BEND OF MY ELBOW, OR - DELETE THAT. SOMEWHERE, SOMEHOW, IN ANOTHER UNIVERSE, ANOTHER TIME-LINE, I'VE BEEN IN BED WITH HER BEFORE. MORE THAN ONCE, TOO, OR SHE COULDN'T HAVE LEARNED SO MUCH....

THAT RAISES AN EVEN EERIER PROBLEM. IN THIS UNIVERSE, SHE'S HAD ME BEFORE; THAT MEANS THERE'S ANOTHER ME RUNNING AROUND SOMEWHERE ON THIS TIME-LINE'S EARTH. BUT WHERE? AM I STILL IN, GOD HELP US, IOWA? WHERE IS THIS WORLD'S JAMES T. KIRK, AND WHERE DID JENNETH MEET HIM?

THEN AGAIN, MAYBE I DON'T REALLY WANT TO KNOW. I'VE MET MYSELF BEFORE - I GUESS I DON'T REALLY WANT TO KNOW WHAT MY OTHER SELF IS DOING. I'D JUST AS SOON NOT MEET ME AGAIN; TOO PAINFUL, TOO CONFUSING.

It was an unprecedentedly early hour for a meeting, and the Sunfire's crew was tense and jittery. They all jumped, flinched, or otherwise reacted nervously when Quannechota walked into the recreation room. Roantree nodded welcome to her, then turned and counted the crowd. All here, from Quanna to Bobby. Memory Joe awake and listening. No point putting it off....

"All right, team," she said, picking up the big, ugly ceramic Speaker's Cup and pouring it brim-full of beer. "Let's get this show on the road. You want my report first?"

"Wait," said Mechanic Bailey. "Are you sure he's busy and won't be eavesdropping?"

"If he were inclined to eavesdrop, he would first have to find us," Quannechota said calmly.

Roantree cut in. "Would it satisfy you if we spoke French? I made damned sure that he can't understand a word of it."

"German," said Bailey, relenting a bit. "It's better for technical details."

"I cannot speak German," said Quannechota, her eyes glinting in faint amusement. "Let us speak Chippewa, in which it is impossible to tell lies."

In the end, as Roantree had expected, they compromised on French - a hard-syllabled Michigan Quebecois which even the computer would have had trouble translating.

"Let us march, then," Bailey capitulated. "Roantree, go on."

"I spoke with him last night," Roantree began, taking a sip of the beer. "Couched, also. He's surely human...." She smiled. "Most certainly a man. Our guess was one-half true. He's not mad - only close to it on account of the loneliness. Our presence helped, and he's most grateful. There's not a reason in the world for him to lie. We've seen him show his honesty. I say, trust him, and I say, let's do the thing." She took another mouthful of beer and handed the Speaker's Cup to the next person on her left, who happened to be Bobby, the 'prentice mech.

"I would like to know," he began in unsteady French, "why he has not thought of this himself. We found it in his own remembering machine. Why could he not, also?" He drank and passed the cup to Quannechota, who had an answer ready.

"It proves he is who he says he is. He is accustomed to thinking in terms of his time, not ours. In his cosmos-of-time, these crystals were depleted from the moon a century past. He has not stopped to think that it goes otherwise in our cosmos. And why? Because he's used to thinking in terms of another history! He lies not." She drank, and gave the cup to Sparks.

"We're wasting time on this question," Sparks said, cracking his fingers for emphasis. "The problem is, should we do it? That's the grand question; that's what High Harbor will want to know. Considering how it goes with High Harbor now," he paused and stared directly at Ann Bailey, "I say, do it. How else will we survive, tell me?" He gulped the cup half-empty and shoved it, almost fiercely, at the aging mechanic.

Bailey turned the cup in her hands for several long seconds, then looked up at Roantree. "Is it true," she asked, "that we're the same people, in both times? If we do this, will our people be alive there?"

The crowd grew very quiet, understanding what she really meant. Roantree, understanding it better than any of them, clenched her hands on her knees.

"Roantree," Bailey insisted. "Can our dead live again?"

Roantree drew a long, painful breath. "There's this example. His friend, one Doctor McCoy, drowned in the flood that destroyed Chicago in 1990, the flood that Judas Pennington, Daughter of Ludd, escaped. When Kirk returned to this year, in our cosmos-of-time, he found this McCoy alive; he had spend his life as a provincial doctor in Georgia. This is the most proof we have." She looked at Bailey, and their glances met in a deadlock of mutual misery and hope.

"One example doesn't suffice. Can't you find others?" Bailey almost pleaded. "We have need of more proof, for so great a thing. If we're mistaken, High Harbor and all her people will be...non-made."

Pas-faisé. A new technical term comes to Quebecois, a quiet, plain, little word with no connotations, like, say éteint - of a universe, blown out like a candle flame. "I will attempt to find further proof," was all Roantree could say.

Ann Bailey dropped her eyes to the cup, drank, and passed it on.

That kills all hope of a fast decision, Roantree thought. Without more proof of survival, they'll hold back. And why not? Any one of us would die to make a better world, but to have all of High Harbor, all our friends, all we've been and done, wiped out - only in the hope that millions of strangers might live in heaven-ah, that's a hard thing to choose....

Her guess was right. The Sunfire's crew argued for another forty minutes without coming to any conclusion.

Captain's Log, Supplemental

SOMETHING'S UP. THIS IS THE FIRST SATURDAY NIGHT THAT THE ANARCHISTS HAVEN'T WHOOPED IT UP AFTER DINNER; THEY BROKE UP INTO SMALL GROUPS AND WENT OFF TO THEIR CABINS - EXCEPT FOR THE USUAL CROWD WHO WENT UP TO THE BRIDGE. IT MUST HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE TOWN MEETING IN HIGH HARBOR, BUT WHAT IN HELL COULD THEY BE ARGUING ABOUT THAT THEY DON'T WANT ME TO KNOW?

ARE THEY PLANNING TO STEAL THE SHIP? NO, THAT WOULDN'T DO THEM ANY GOOD. WITHOUT ME...OR AT LEAST, WITHOUT THE GOODWILL OF THE ENTERPRISE SETTLEMENT, THEY COULDN'T BEGIN TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY'D STOLEN. THEY'RE NOT FOOLS - THEY WOULDN'T DESTROY THEIR ONLY CHANCE OF SURVIVAL.

MAYBE I CAN GET JENNETH TO TELL ME WHEN SHE COMES TO MY CABIN TONIGHT.... SHE PROMISED TO SHOW UP. SHE'D BETTER. I'VE BEEN ALONE TOO LONG....

Roantree came to his cabin just as he finished the tape. She stepped inside, looked him up and down, and without a word, began pulling off her clothes. Kirk sat down on the nearest chair and matched her, boot for boot, shirt for shirt, pants for pants. This time he didn't wait for her to push him into bed.

An hour later, drained and contented, he remembered what he'd wanted to ask her.

"We're having a theological argument," she said, frowning a little, and looking away. "This business of the same individuals showing up in different time-lines - it's become very important to us. I don't expect you to understand why it's such a big thing...."

"Well, I know that people can get awfully intense about religious matters." He slipped one hand to her waist, unwilling to stop touching her. "Why don't your people want me to hear them arguing?"

"It wouldn't be kind," Roantree smiled oddly. "Consider: do religious scholars want to reveal their squabbles in front of the Master?" Let's hope that diverts him for awhile!

"I'm no master," Kirk insisted, the old fierce shame cutting through the sweet fog of afterglow. "I'm just a man, Jenneth - a man who made one horrible, small mistake that cost me my world, my whole universe, my command, friends, everything. You were right; the loneliness almost did kill me. Now I've gained some friends, and more - your people, and you. I don't want to lose them. It hurts that they don't completely trust me. I know that's probably too much to ask, so soon, but...." He ran out of words, and pressed his face against her shoulder.

Roantree ran her fingers through his hair, mussing it completely, and bit her lip until she thought it would bleed. I can't give you hope, she thought bitterly. Not yet, not until all of them decide. Not my choice to make, not for their lives and world...all our years. Pas-faisé. But also, King Ludd - pas faise! "Kirk, it may sound silly to you, but it's very important for us to know - beyond all shadow of a doubt - that people are the same in the different time-lines. We want to know if our people would be alive there as well as here. There's the example of McCoy, but we're looking for more proof."

"There's this," he said, running his fingers along the line of her collarbone and watching her jump. "We know each other from somewhere. We've learned about each other's bodies before we ever met in this time-line."

"True, but can't remember where or when. I ought to remember someone like you." She sat up and firmly pushed his hand away. "Besides, this isn't enough to convince my people."

"Besides," Kirk agreed, "I couldn't find any corroborating evidence on the computer. No record of any distant cousin named Jenneth Roantree, or anything like it."

"And neither Memory Joe or any of our other Memory people can find me a cousin James Kirk," Roantree sighed. "Dead end."

"Why can't you ask your relatives?"

"What relatives?" Her voice was suddenly hard. "I don't have any living relatives left - at least not in High Harbor, not that I could talk to. There might be some in Iowa, but I don't know them."

"Are both your parents dead?" he asked stupidly. But she's barely middle-aged, if that! Their medicine's good. How? "How did it happen?"

"Dad died of a heart attack, nine years ago. Mom died two years ago - same thing. My brother and my first husband, and...." She rolled away from him and slammed her fist against the wall.

"Easy, Jenneth! Easy...." He reached toward her, then thought better of it. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to rake up old griefs."

"Not your fault. There's just been a lot of dying in my family, that's all. It's a hard universe."

"Maybe we can make it a little better," Kirk offered. "Once our two communities can get together, things will change. We'll be stronger together than both separately."

"Perhaps." Roantree turned back to him, wearing a preoccupied look. "There's that old question of compatibility. How far can you bend to our people's customs, and how far must we bend to yours?"

"If I'm any example, I think we can get along. I like what I've seen of your people, Jen. I could be happy living with them."

"Provided you could get used to our marriage customs," Roantree chuckled. "I saw the way your eyebrows climbed when I told you about marrying triple."

"True," Kirk grinned back. "Of course, I can see that the system has some advantages. Lack of jealousy, for instance - I'm very grateful that Sparks and Quanna aren't upset about, uh, this."

"Jealous? Why should they be?"

"Uh, never mind. You'll just have to explain to me about how a child-raising contract works. To begin with, how do you know what to name the children? Do they get their father's name, or what?"

"That's no problem," Roantree shrugged. "Boys get their father's name, and girls take their mother's."

"Oh." Kirk sat up suddenly. Damn! I'll have to trace my cousins through their mother's maiden names. Oh, headache! "Well, that wouldn't be too hard for our people to adjust to. No real problem."

"One thing your people will have to do," Roantree smiled and tugged a lock of his hair. "Grow your hair long. Among our people, a cropped head is a sign of shame and exile."

"It is? Oh. Now I see why you looked at me so strangely when you first came on the Enterprise...you must have thought.... I wonder how I'll look with long hair!"

He slipped out of the bed and padded over to the mirror, studying his face. It looked rather odd with his hair mussed. He tried to imagine himself with hair like Vanderhoof's, or maybe with a Jefferson-style pig-tail, or Co-ordinator's braids....

"What do you think" said Roantree, padding up beside him.

Kirk looked at both their faces in the mirror, and time stood still.

Dear God, it can't be!

"What's wrong, Kirk?"

But what if...girls...their mothers' names....

"Jenneth," he said, turning to face her. "Did you have a ~~brother~~ named Sam?"

"I did," she said, frowning in bewilderment.

"What...what happened to him? How did he die?"

"He went away to Denver, married a local girl, had one child. They all died in a plague of rabies there. Kirk, I never told you ~~about my brother~~ - how did you know?"

Denver - Deneva! Died in a plague of.... "And was your mother's name Elizabeth?"

"How did you know?"

"Jenneth! What was your father's name?"

"George Kirk. Why?"

Before Kirk would force his voice to answer, she understood. He saw it coming in her eyes. She shot out one hand, grabbed him by the shoulder, and spun him around to face the mirror.

There they stood, for a time they could never afterwards measure, silently comparing the lines of muscle and bone, matching the color of hair and eyes, seeing the proof more and more in every detail. Kirk saw the reflection of his hand trembling as he traced the width of his jaw and chin. Her bones are finer, sharper but the same angle and line...muscles smaller, more compact, skin smoother; small differences that sex makes but all the rest - the same. My God!

"No wonder," he heard Jenneth say. "No wonder you seemed so familiar. Even in bed...."

That was too much. Kirk stumbled away from the mirror and fell into the nearest chair, wild laughter climbing in his throat. "Jenneth," he managed to say, "if I had a credit for every time I've been told to go screw myself...."

He pressed his fists against his mouth to keep the laughter from getting completely out of control.

Roantree came up and dropped a hand on his shoulder, and squeezed very hard. It helped.

"Jim," she said, her voice quiet and steady, but her eyes blazing. "Brother and shadow...Jim, this the will believe!"



We're Jim Kirk, Fly Us

Captain's Log, Stardate 6056.7.

THE HIGH HARBOR TOWN MEETING IS IN FULL SWING DOWN BELOW. JENNETH AND HER SENIOR OFFICERS - I MEAN, SECTION HEADS - ARE OFF THE BRIDGE SITTING IN ON THE MEETING. JENNETH TOLD ME TO WAIT IN MY CABIN. NORMALLY I'D RESENT BEING KEPT ON MY OWN BRIDGE, BUT QUANNECHOTA ASSURES ME THAT IT'S NECESSARY; THE SUNFIRE'S CREW TRUSTS ME NOW, BUT THE OTHERS DON'T YET. I HAVE THE FEELING I'M BEING SAVED FOR SOME KIND OF SPECIAL WITNESS APPEARANCE. THEY STILL HAVEN'T TOLD ME WHAT'S BEING DECIDED OR WHY. THIS BUSINESS OF ALTERNATE TIME-LINES IS SO IMPORTANT TO THEIR FUTURE PLANS.

THE SUNFIRE'S CHIEF BIOLOGIST, A LITTLE CANADIAN NAMED JEAN BATTRE-LE-DIABLE, GAVE ME SOME VILE-TASTING POTION (MOSTLY ALCOHOL, I SUSPECT) THAT MADE THIS A LOT EASIER TO ACCEPT, BUT I'M STILL SHAKING. DAMN! WHY COULDN'T I SEE IT BEFORE? I KNEW I HAD A DOUBLE SOMEWHERE IN THIS TIME-LINE. JUST AN X CHROMOSOME INSTEAD OF A Y, SO SMALL A DIFFERENCE.... BUT SHE'S ME. JENNETH IS ME! WHY DID IT TAKE ME SO LONG TO SEE MYSELF?

JANICE LESTER! THAT'S WHY!

Kirk punched off the recorder and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes. Get a grip on yourself, James T., he thought. You've lasted this long without cracking, and you can hold out a little longer. Now straighten up and take a look at it....

Remembering Janice Lester was painfully easy; the hard part was making himself retrace what happened after she'd zapped him with her damned mind-transfer machine. Pain, confused dreams, slow waking, and.... Even now the memory made him shudder. I just felt...wrong. The bed seemed too big. My arms felt too thin. Head hurt- I rubbed my eyes and my face felt wrong. Then I looked at my hands, and I...didn't recognize them.... The rest of the memories came in a flood that he couldn't have stopped if he'd tried. I first thought I'd been sick, unconscious for months. Sat up to reach for the call-button...felt something strange pulling at my chest... looked down.... At first I didn't realize what they were. Superimposed over the memory flashed an image of Jenneth Roantree, bare to the waist, smiling at him out of his own face above her monumental breasts. I was too stunned to be frightened, or think. Slid my hands down.... Yes, that was gone, too - replaced with a complicated arrangement I didn't begin to understand. I somehow kept from panicking, hit the call-button. Nurse Chapel came in. "Christine," I begged, too frantic to be formal. "Please get me a mirror!" She wondered how I knew her name, went and got the mirror. I looked. Saw. Janice Lester's face.... That's when I started screaming.

Kirk dug his hands hard into his shoulders to remind himself of where he was, and struggled to choke the old terrors down. It had been over a year since he'd last thought about the incident, and the horror of the memory still amazed him. Alien, he thought. I'm afraid of...seeing myself as something different, alien...not what I really am, and Janice Lester's body was so utterly different.... Anything - a Vulcan, an Andorian, even a Tellarite - I could have stood it better.... Dear God, can that be true? Is a woman - a human female - more alien to me than any non-human I know? Is that what I really think? He covered his face with his hands, struck by a new and withering blast of shame. Is that why I couldn't see myself in Jenneth, even though she's nothing like Janice Lester, even though she's closer to me than my own brother? I couldn't imagine myself as something

that alien.... But she IS alien, isn't she? My genes, but not my environment: a shaggy, pagan Anarchist with a different body and a different history.... Alien! Isn't she?

He had no answer for that question. It stuck in his mind like a burr, itching and unremovable, and he was still puzzling over it when Sparks came to fetch him up to the bridge.

Project Tape R-57, Roantree recording.

I'M IN THE DINING ROOM RIGHT NOW, TAKING A REST FROM THE LONG DEBATES. PROFESSOR BIELOWICZ IS SUMMARIZING THE DEPARTMENT REPORTS, AND IT'S TOO THICK FOR ME TO FOLLOW. I MANAGED TO KEEP UP WHILE SHE DISCUSSED THE TWO MAJOR THEORIES: EITHER WE'LL GO FROM ONE UNIVERSE INTO ANOTHER, LEAVING THIS ONE UNCHANGED, OR ELSE OUR OWN UNIVERSE WILL STRAIGHTEN ITSELF OUT AND WE'LL BECOME WHAT WE SHOULD HAVE BEEN, HAVING LITTLE OR NO MEMORY OF THIS HISTORY, EXCEPT MAYBE IN DREAMS, AND OUR CHILDREN WILL BE ALIVE AGAIN.... SO AT BEST WE'LL HAUL OURSELVES INTO PARADISE, AND AT WORST WE'LL DO NO HARM. THAT SOUNDS GOOD ENOUGH FOR ME. SOME OF THE OTHER PROFESSORS CHALLENGED THE MATHEMATICAL POINTS AND GOT INTO AN ARGUMENT THAT LOST ME COMPLETELY, SO I LEFT QUANNA LISTENING AVIDLY ON THE BRIDGE AND CAME DOWN HERE FOR A QUIET BEER. SHE SAID SHE'D CALL ME WHEN THE "QUESTION OF CONTINUING IDENTITY" CAME UP. SHE'LL ALSO SEND SPARKS DOWN TO GET KIRK WHEN WE NEED HIM.

HE SEEMS TO BE TAKING THIS BADLY, AND I DON'T KNOW WHY. LAST NIGHT AFTER HE FOUND OUT WHO I WAS, OR WHO WE ARE, HE DID NOTHING BUT SIT AND SHIVER FOR AN HOUR OR SO... I TRIED ASKING HIM ABOUT HIS LIFE IN THAT OTHER HISTORY, BUT HE WOULDN'T TALK ABOUT IT. I OFFERED TO RUB HIS BACK FOR HIM, BUT HE FLINCHED AWAY WITH A MUMBLED COMMENT ABOUT NOT BEING ABLE TO COMFORT HIMSELF. I FINALLY GAVE UP AND CALLED SPARKS IN TO SIT WITH HIM WHILE I WENT TO TALK TO QUANNA - AND INCIDENTALLY TO WARN JEAN BATTRE-LE-DIABLE TO KEEP AN EYE ON HIM. AT LEAST HE GETS ALONG WELL WITH SPARKS.... HELL, HE'D HAVE TO! HE SEES THE SAME VIRTUES IN SPARKS THAT I DO! WHEN I LEFT THEY WERE CALMLY PLAYING POKER WITH QUANNA'S TAROT DECK. YES, SPARKS IS THE RIGHT PERSON TO SEND DOWN FOR HIM.... BUT WHY DOESN'T HE WANT TO TALK TO ME? I'M HIM, AFTER ALL! ...OR IS HE AFRAID OF HIMSELF?

THERE'S QUANNA'S SIGNAL! ROANTREE OUT.

Kirk stepped out of the turbolift to find Roantree, Quannechota and Bailey waiting for him. Roantree smiled reassuringly and started to get out of the command chair, but he waved her back down and took up a position just behind her. On the viewscreen was an image of a huge old-fashioned stadium, beginning to crumble with age, its upper tier ringed with drooping black flags that sported no device but a gold sunburst. Sparks went to his console and dialed the scene closer, and the screen revealed details: only the lower tiers of the stadium were filled, the seats thronged with the survivors of High Harbor. The people were long-haired and bandana'ed, many of them ragged and smoke-stained, and not a few of them in bandages. All of them were armed with rifles or shotguns or pistols, which they seemed to wear as easily as their clothing. In the aisles of the stadium stood old-fashioned video cameras, and the crowded tiers were studded with receivers and microphones - obviously placed for the convenience of the audience, so that no one would be left out of the proceedings. In the center of the crowded field was a rough circle of tables covered with more cameras, microphones, receivers, and papers. At the tables, jammed elbow-to-elbow, sat a row of assorted men and women. One of them was holding a large silver cup - looking suspiciously like an old-style sports trophy - and reading from a sheaf of notes. She was speaking pure Mathematics, and Kirk could understand less than one word in ten.

"That's Professor Beilowicz," Roantree explained. "She's summarizing the mathematical proofs of the survival of identity between alternate time-lines."

"Oh," said Kirk. So why did you drag me up here? What am I supposed to do?

The professor put down her sheaf of notes and commented, looking toward one of the video cameras that was apparently her tie-in with the Enterprise, "So much for the mathematical and documentary proof. Co-ordinator Roantree, you claim to have further proof of the Survival of Identity Theory. May we now see your proof, please?"

"This is it," Roantree whispered to Kirk as she stood up and walked toward the viewscreen. "Citizens, you already know of the McCoy example. I've found another one - more immediate, more easily checked." She turned and signalled to Kirk. He stepped forward on awkward feet, painfully aware of how many eyes were on him, and stopped one step behind her.

"Citizens," Roantree said, turning back to the screen. "Take a good look at us. Both of us. Look carefully. Tell me what you see."

There was dead silence for a long moment, then a quiet muttering that grew stronger as it picked up more voices, a sea of shocked whispers growing louder, more elated, finally shouting like a storm. Kirk shivered under the impact of that gale of sound, feeling terribly naked before all this incomprehensible attention. He glanced at Roantree and saw her smiling, bright-eyed with triumph.

"Citizens, citizens...." Professor Beilowicz's voice cut through the storm of voices as she pounded the silver cup like a gavel on the long table. "Citizens, please, let us be mannerly! Une chose par fois!"

Astonishingly, the voices stopped. There was a faint shuffling and creaking as people resumed their seats, but no other noise. Kirk wondered how a townful of Anarchists had developed that kind of discipline, and what on Earth maintained it.

"Now," said the Professor, shuffling through her notes, "is there any further discussion on the topic of Survival of Identity?"

There was no sound. The Professor, obviously surprised, repeated the question slowly and looked toward the cameras as if to be sure that the Enterprise and the Cannibal Wheel had heard her clearly. Still no sound came. The moment stretched long. The Professor put down her notes and held out the cup, clearly offering it to anyone who would take it. Nobody raised a hand. She waited a long time, looking as stunned as anyone might who realizes that she has just been picked for an unpleasant duty, and has no graceful way of avoiding it. Through the audience ran untraceable whispers of, "Tally...."

"Very well," she said slowly. "It seems that the burden of the announcement falls to me." She took the cup in both hands and squared her shoulders. "Citizens, rarely does this happen, and I wish it might never be required at all, but here it lies and we must deal with it. This will affect all of us, which is why the crews chose to wait upon our decision, and we must decide together. Citizens, necessity forces us. I call for a Tally of Opinions! Shall we bid the Sunfire's crew to prepare the road to Paradise? All those in favor... stand up!"

There was a vast stirring and sighing throughout the ancient stadium as the High Harbor people climbed to their feet and lifted their guns over their heads. The chill autumn sun glinted on thousands of upraised barrels. On the bridge, Roantree let out her breath in a long, quiet sigh. My Lord, Kirk thought, the tabooed and dangerous thing, done only as a last resort, is...is taking a vote!

"All those opposed?" asked the professor.

There was more shuffling as great blocks of people sat down. When the noise ceased, there was not one person standing nor any weapon raised. In the silence, the faint calling of birds overhead seemed as loud as trumpets.

"The motion carries." Professor Bielowicz set down the cup.

Cheers rose up like a roll of thunder from the stadium, punctuated by the clatter of gunfire as some of the more excitable Citizens fired their rifles and shotguns into the air. Ear-splitting whoops, howls, and cheers burst through the intercom. Sparks responded with an Indian war-yell and a quick punch of a button that sent a racketing dance-tune back through the intercom:

"We've got to get out of this place,
if it's the last thing we ever do!
We've gotta get out of this place!
Girl, there's a better life for me and you...."

Ann Bailey hopped out of her chair, vaulted the railing, grabbed Sparks and began dancing a wild mazurka around the bridge. Quannechota actually smiled. Kirk wondered if they'd all gone crazy. Roantree got up and made her way to him, laughing furiously while her eyes blazed.

"Jim!" she shouted, taking him by both arms. "We've won! They've agreed! It's unanimous! We're going to do it!"

"Do what?" asked Kirk, completely at sea.

"We're going with you to Chicago! We're going to change it back - set time right again! We can take heaven by storm!"

"What? But how.... The dilithium crystals...."

"The dilithium crystals are on the moon," Quannechota's voice cut through the pandemonium. "In your time-line, they were mined out completely less than 100 years ago. In our time-line, the war with the Tycho Base people ended all lunar mining more than 200 years ago. The remaining crystals are still there. The Sunfire is carrying mining equipment, and we can easily...."

Kirk didn't hear the rest of it. A sudden wave of fierce dizziness lifted him off his feet and whited out his vision. Is it true? echoed through the fog. "Easy now," said a voice somewhere nearby. Unseen arms caught him in bands of solidity. "I'm all right...." he tried to insist, blindly wrapping his arms around a convenient pair of shoulders. It took a few minutes for his vision to clear, and when it did he saw that he was leaning on Jenneth Roantree. "I'm all right," he repeated, carefully pulling away from her.

"Fine," she said, eyeing him thoughtfully. "What say we go down to your room for a drink?"

"Right. I could use it," he agreed, stumbling toward the turbolift door. What he really needed was to lie down and think this over, re-adjust his thinking, get used to the incredible change. He hurried into the turbolift, Roantree close behind him, and leaned against the wall. I've got a case of "the bends," he thought. Sudden release from heavy pressure.... I'll be all right. I just have to get used to this.

Roantree came up behind him, put her arms around his shoulders and planted a soft kiss on the back of his neck. It went through him like an electric shock. "No!" he flinched away from her, turned around and held her off by the arms. "Jenneth, no! I.... We can't do that any more."

"Why, Jim? What's wrong?"

"Look, I...I'm having trouble understanding this...this business of who we are, you and I. We're the same, but we've got to be different...similar pasts, but not identical... Dammit, Jenneth, the only way I can handle this is to think of you as...as my sister! You're my long-lost twin sister, understand? So I can't...touch you anymore. It would be incest. That's how I have to see it."

"But you've already balled me twice."

"I didn't know then! Now I do! I can't do that again!"

"All right," said Roantree, looking him up and down. "If that's how you need to see it, that's how it'll be - Brother Jim. But you know you need somebody to...."

"I'll manage," he insisted. "There must be somebody in your crew who'll be willing to put up with me. Don't worry."

Roantree gave him a doubtful look. "Well, we can deal with that later," she said. "Will you be all right now, or do you want Sparks to come down and rub your back or play poker or whatever?"

"Thanks, but no. I need to be alone for awhile. I have a lot to think about."

"Okay." She smiled and stepped back toward the doors. "Dinner's likely to be late - we've got loads of planning to do. Want me to call you at dinnertime?"

Kirk nodded absently, not really caring. Roantree shrugged and walked out of the turbolift. It took Kirk a moment to remember to tell the machine which deck to go to.

Captain's Log, Stardate 6057.3.

I DIDN'T GET DINNER AFTER ALL - SLEPT RIGHT THROUGH IT. NIGHTMARES AGAIN, BUT THIS TIME THEY WERE DIFFERENT; THERE WAS AN ELEMENT OF HOPE IN THEM. I SAW MYSELF SCRAMBLING UP A STEEP MOUNTAIN THAT I KNEW WAS ON THE MOON, TRYING TO REACH A HORDE OF SHINING CRYSTALS AT THE TOP. CLEAR ENOUGH WHAT THAT MEANS! YES, I CAN BELIEVE IT NOW. YES, THERE REALLY IS A WAY OUT OF THIS TRAP! YES, WE CAN GET HOME! YES! YES! YES!

THE ANARCHISTS ARE WILLING TO HELP ME FIND IT - THEY WANT TO SET TIME RIGHT, GO INTO MY TIME-LINE - THAT'S WHAT THEY'VE BEEN ARGUING ABOUT ALL WEEK. NOW EVERYTHING MAKES SENSE.... BUT CAN THEY DO IT? THERE ARE ONLY 56 OF THEM, AND I DON'T KNOW HOW GOOD THEIR MINING TECHNOLOGY IS, NOR HOW MUCH THE SHIP CAN HELP WITHOUT CRACKING THE CRYSTALS IT STILL HAS. NO HELP FOR IT: I'VE GOT TO CALL THE CREW'S SETTLEMENT TOMORROW, TELL THEM WHAT'S HAPPENED, TRY TO GET THEM TO COME HELP. IF ONLY SCOTTY'S WILLING TO TALK TO ME.... I'VE GOT TO MAKE HIM SEE THAT WE'LL NEED HIM, THAT HE'S GOT TO HELP, NO MATTER HOW HE FEELS ABOUT ME.

I HOPE CHRIS CHAPEL COMES BACK, TOO, AND M'BENGA. NOW THAT BONES IS GONE, WHOM CAN I TALK TO ABOUT WHAT'S EATING ME? THIS IDENTITY BUSINESS...IT STICKS IN MY MIND LIKE A BONE IN MY THROAT. I TOLD JENNETH THE TRUTH; I HAVE TO SEE HER AS MY SISTER. THAT'S THE ONLY WAY I CAN ACCEPT THIS....

THERE WAS ANOTHER NIGHTMARE. I DREAMED I WAS LYING IN BED IN JENNETH'S ROOM, PILLOWED BETWEEN SPARKS AND QUANNE-CHOTA, AND BOTH OF THEM HAD THEIR ARMS AROUND ME. I FELT NORMAL, LIKE MYSELF - I MEAN, MY BODY SEEMED TO BE MINE, ALL RIGHT - UNTIL I TRIED TO MOVE. THERE WAS A STRANGE, SOFT, TUGGING WEIGHT ON MY CHEST. INSTANT PANIC. I DIDN'T DARE LOOK, JUST BIT MY LIP UNTIL I THOUGHT IT WOULD BLEED, AND WOKE UP STILL BITING. EVEN THOUGH I KNEW WHERE I WAS, KNEW IT WAS ONLY A DREAM, I STILL HAD TO LOOK DOWN AND MAKE SURE....

HOLD ON, HOLD ON. I'VE HELD ON THIS LONG. I CAN LAST A LITTLE LONGER.

THE WORST IS, SHORTLY AFTER I WOKE UP, JENNETH CALLED ON THE INTERCOM AND ASKED IF I WAS ALL RIGHT. SHE SAID SHE'D HAD A BAD DREAM ABOUT ME, THAT I WAS LOST SOMEWHERE AND DESPERATELY AFRAID OF SOMETHING AND THAT HER PEOPLE PUT SOME VALUE ON DREAMS, AND THAT SHE HAD ONLY A LITTLE OF "THE GIFT" BUT SHE'D LEARNED TO TRUST IT.... I PUT HER OFF, TOLD HER THERE WAS NO TROUBLE, AND LAY AWAKE FOR HOURS AFTERWARD THINKING ABOUT THAT. IS JENNETH TELEPATHIC? IF SHE IS, THEN WHAT ABOUT ME? THERE'S OFTEN A MENTAL LINK BETWEEN TWINS, AND WE'RE CLOSER THAN TWINS....

NO, TOO MUCH. I'LL DEAL WITH THIS LATER. ONE THING AT A TIME: UNE CHOSE PAR FOIS. I'LL TRY TO GET THE CREW BACK FIRST, THEN FIND SOMEONE I CAN TALK TO ABOUT THIS. IF UHURA'S WILLING TO FORGIVE AND FORGET.... ABOUT M'RESS AND AREX.... IF ONLY SHE'S WILLING TO COME BACK TO ME.... GOD KNOWS, I NEED SOMEBODY! I HAD TO TURN JENNETH AWAY, BUT THIS BED'S SO COLD WHEN IT'S HALF EMPTY....

Lt. Commander Montgomery Scott, late of the U.S.S. Enterprise, stood in the clearing between the communications cabin and the powerhouse, waiting for the transporter beam. He didn't look at the others who stood waiting with him; they were busy with their own thoughts, and he was miserable and apprehensive with his own.

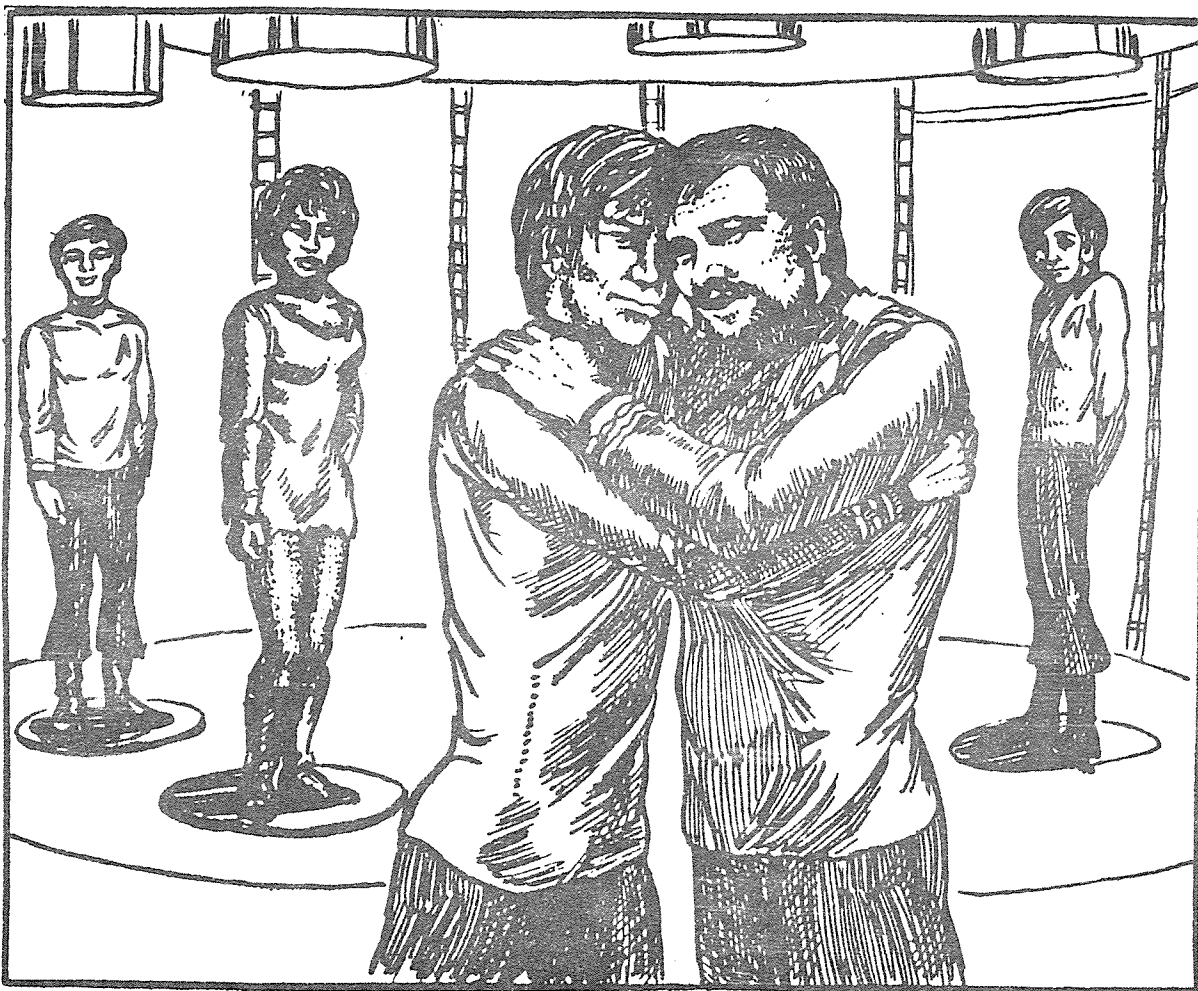
We're all guilty, he decided, but me more than most. 'Twas my cruelty sent him away...into madness, or what? I won't know until I see him again. But what will I say to him then? The last time I spoke to him, I drove him away - so far he couldn't hear me calling...or perhaps he didn't believe it, or was too sick even to notice. What was it I drove him to, with a few ill-chosen words? He didn't know about the fire in the generator room; he couldn't have known how desperately busy I was. I could have explained instead of cutting him off so cruelly.... My God, he was begging me for help! He begged me to keep him from the black despair, and I turned him away! How should he forgive me that? What can I ever say to him now?

Transporter sparkle glowed around him. Scott took a last quick breath of Alter-Earth's atmosphere and an instant later stood in the transporter room of the Enterprise, with Uhura and Chris Chapel and Sulu and Chekov and Garrovick beside him. All here, and all well, he sighed with relief. There's nothing wrong with the transporter, or his using of it. Then Scott made himself turn and look at the man behind the control console.

My Lord, how thin he is! Scott's first reaction was dismay. So thin, and his hair's grown so long and his eyes.... Oh mercy, those eyes! Scott could stand no more. He jumped off the platform and ran to the console, pausing only when he realized that Kirk was almost cringing away from him. He reached out with both hands and took Kirk by the wrists. "Captain," he asked, "are ye all right?" No one could have mistaken the concern in his voice.

Kirk shut his eyes for an instant, then opened them and managed to smile. "Everything's fine now, Scotty... or it's going to be." Forgiven! Forgiven! Impulsively, he stepped forward and hugged his Chief Engineer.

"Och, there noo...." Scott hugged back, too relieved to be embarrassed. "'Tis all well. There's us here, and there's more ta come."



At his words, Kirk remembered the others. He disengaged himself gently and turned to look at them, the remnant of his senior officers: Sulu and Garrovick smiling openly, Chekov - looking oddly worn and bloodshot-eyed - staring at him as if he held the key to Paradise, Uhura with her face a quietly closed book, Christine Chapel seeming older than when he'd last seen her and wrapped in a dead calm that was more resignation than peace. What have I done to all of them? Kirk wondered. Yet they were willing to come.... "Welcome back," was all he could say.

Sulu and Chekov and Garrovick hopped off the transporter pad and hurried toward him. In a minute they had him surrounded, offering handshakes and asking questions and telling him how good it was to be back. There was nothing forced or even apologetic about their greeting; they were simply happy to be with him. It felt awfully good.

Scotty deftly took charge of the transporter controls, and the room began to fill with crewmen, most of whom came over to join the cluster around Kirk. In short order it became necessary to move the welcoming party

out into the corridor, and then to the nearest recreation room. Kirk had to answer the same questions several times over, and he didn't mind in the least. If several crewmen gave worried looks to his lengthening hair and thinned body and somewhat haggard face, he had just as many concerned glances for his worn-looking crewmen in their frayed and fading uniforms. These past few months couldn't have been very easy for them, either.

Somewhere in the middle of the proceedings, the Anarchists began to drift in, openly curious about their new neighbors. Kirk quailed for a moment, wondering if his people had been sufficiently briefed not to talk about Federation politics in any way, shape, or form, but soon found he needn't have worried. The crew had been effectively warned, and were more interested in asking questions than in talking about their own timeline. Jenneth Roantree didn't appear, and Kirk was grateful.

Some of the Anarchists in the crowd brought in musical instruments, and some of the Enterprise crewmen made a supply run down to the mess hall, once they'd learned that the Anarchists had managed to program the selector for beer, and the reception soon turned into a large, noisy, joyful, informal party. Both groups were obviously determined to make the alliance work, and minor cultural clashes were promptly smoothed over. Only a few crewmen paled when the Anarchists brought in a large brass water-pipe, filled the bottom with wine and the top with a suspicious-looking weed, lit the pipe, and amiably offered puffs to the Enterprise crew. John Yellow Horse from the Anthropology section calmly accepted, making comments about Plains Indians' peace pipe rituals, and after that various crewmen worked up enough nerve to join him. If any of the crew were dismayed by the odd barbarisms of their new neighbors, they took care not to show it. In fact, they seemed fascinated with the strange customs and history of High Harbor. Kirk tossed away the last of his worries about social troubles, relaxed out of his role of host, and settled back to enjoy the party.

"You must admit, this is a lot more fun than the average diplomatic reception," he commented to Chekov, who hadn't strayed far from him since that meeting in the transporter room.

"That it is, Sir," Chekov agreed, staring solemnly at the suspiciously-clear fluid in his glass. "I ken't remember a party I've been happier to attend."

"Me either," Kirk chuckled, glancing at Chekov's drink. "You seem to be making up for lost time. Couldn't you get any real Russian vodka down there?"

"No, but that didn't matter." Chekov frowned at his glass, as if making some unpleasant decision. "This isn't vodka, Sir. It's water. I've been on the wagon ever since you called us back and told us about the High Hairbor people." He straightened up into a more military-looking posture and turned to look at Kirk. "Keptain, after we left the Enterprise I tried wery hard to drink myself to death. It was a temporary failing, Sir, and it won't happen again."

"Pavel...." Kirk was too shocked to say anything.

"I was upset, Sir. Not chust about losing the Federation, but because afterward I began to t'ink that we'd treated you wery cruelly." Once started, the confession came in a rush. "I thought I should hef stayed wit' you on the ship, not left you all alone, but I chust didn't know how to say it...how to go back and epolochize. I suppose I simply lecked the courage, Sir. I was engry at myself for it, and I felt useless anyway, so...." He turned his gaze back to his glass.

"Pavel, it's all right now." Kirk put his hand on his shoulder. "The past four months have been sheer hell for all of us. God knows, I'm in no position to blame anyone for their reactions to a catastrophe like this! But it's over now - or at least it's beginning to end - and we have a way to get home. It won't be easy, and we're all going to have to work on it, so there's no point in letting the past chew at us any more than we have to. For heaven's sake, Pavel, let's let bygones be bygones and concentrate on the future."

"T-t'enk you, Sir." Chekov wiped his eyes on his frayed sleeve. "But I'm efraild I hef to tell you that not eferybody is willing to see it thet way. Not all of the crew came with us, Sir. There was much airgument about it, and many of the crew - t'ey were all people who didn't know you wery well, Sir, mostly recent replacements, people who hedn't serfed wery long on the Enterprise - they didn't dare to trust the High Hairbor people, or...or...."

"Or me? It's all right, I can understand it." Kirk took care to keep his voice steady. "How many of the crew came back?"

"Only 112, Sir. I don't know if that's enough to maintain the ship, even with the help of the Enairchists."

"I see." Kirk looked around the recreation room and realized that he should have guessed it before. The room was crowded, but not that crowded, and there had been no new arrivals in hours. For that matter, he couldn't recall seeing Christine or Uhura since that moment in the transporter room. "All right, that gives us a total of 168. That's enough to manage through the mining operation. Once we've got the crystals safely installed, we'll ask again. If any more are willing to come back it'll be a help; if no, then we can manage without them. Besides..." he made himself smile reassuringly at Chekov, "perhaps it's just as well. Somebody ought to be there to welcome the High Harbor people when they arrive."

"Do you really think they'll make it, Sir? That's more than a thousand miles, and through hostile territory...."

"I think they will," said Kirk. "They're extraordinarily tough people." But those are awfully tough odds, too. I'd better talk to Jenneth. "Go ahead and enjoy yourself, Pavel. I'm going to go talk to an old girlfriend." He got up, tossed a cheerfully informal salute at Chekov's parting grin and went out.

Halfway down the corridor he heard his last words over again and stopped to think about them. ...an old girlfriend... There's still a chance.... Jenneth can wait. He retraced his steps and went to Deck 5.

Project Tape R-61, Roantree recording.

QUANNECHOTA AND BAILEY HAVE BEEN WORKING AT THE TRANSPORTER FOR THE LAST FOUR HOURS, AND WE'VE GOT HALF THE LIBRARY MOVED, PLUS THREE LIBRARIANS. THE TROUBLE OVER THE FIRST LOAD WAS STRAIGHTENED OUT: THE ONLY REAL PROBLEM WAS THAT THE ENTERPRISE SETTLEMENT WASN'T EXPECTING THE BOOKS QUITE SO SOON. I SUSPECT THAT THEY MIGHT NOT HAVE EXPECTED US AT ALL; THEY DIDN'T THINK WE'D USE THE TRANSPORTER, AND THEY KNOW HOW FAR THE REST OF HIGH HARBOR HAS COME TO REACH THEM.

WELL, ADMITTEDLY THE ODDS AREN'T VERY GOOD. THE FIRST HUNDRED MILES WILL BE THE HARDEST - THEY DECIDED TO FLAT-BOAT IT DOWN THE RIVER AND ACROSS THE LAKE, WHICH SHOULD MAKE IT A BIT EASIER - BUT THE REMAINING 900-ODD MILES WON'T BE ANY DISH OF BERRIES AND CREAM. JUST REACHING THE MISSISSIPPI WITHOUT TROUBLE IS GOING TO BE UNLIKELY, AND THEN GETTING MORE BOATS FOR 12,000 PEOPLE.... I'M GLAD IT'S NOT MY HEADACHE! WE WON'T BE ABLE TO HELP; WE'LL BE ON THE MOON BY THEN. WHAT CAN ANYONE DO BUT WISH THEM LUCK?

I'VE BEEN GOING OVER THE FACTS AND FIGURES OF THE MOON LANDING. THE COMPUTER SAYS THAT THE LAST DILITHIUM DEPOSITS WERE MINED OUT OF CLAVIUS CRATER IN KIRK'S TIME-LINE, SO WE'LL AIM THERE. THE GROUND IS SAID TO BE TREACHEROUS: ICE DEPOSITS AT ALL LEVELS FROM THE SURFACE TO THREE MILES DOWN. IT WOULD JUST BE MY LUCK TO LAND THE SUNFIRE RIGHT ON TOP OF AN ICEBERG AND STEP OUT INTO A JET-HEATED LAKE! STILL, WE CAN'T AFFORD TO LAND TOO FAR FROM THE DILITHIUM DEPOSITS. MAYBE THE ENTERPRISE'S SENSING EQUIPMENT CAN PICK OUT A SAFE BERTH FOR US.

I'LL HAVE TO GET SOME PEOPLE OVER TO THE SUNFIRE TOMORROW AND GO OVER THE SYSTEMS. I DON'T LIKE THE WAY THAT #8 VALVE TENDS TO CHOKER UP, AND THE SHIP HAS BEEN SITTING IDLE FOR SO MANY DAYS THAT MORE THAN ONE VALVE COULD HAVE HAD TIME TO FREEZE AND CLOG. MAYBE KIRK'S ENGINEER COULD HELP WITH THAT; IN THE BRIEF TIME I HAD TO TALK WITH HIM BEFORE HE WENT UP TO THE PARTY, HE SAID THAT HE'D "GIVE MA EYETEETH TA SEE HOO SHE'S DESIGNED." PRICELESS!

QUANNA JUST CAME IN WITH A HANDFUL OF FIGURES, AND THE NEWS IN THEM ISN'T GOOD. WE CAN FINISH TRANSPORTING THE LIBRARY COLLECTION AND THE LAB EQUIPMENT, BUT AFTER THAT WE'D BETTER RESTRICT THE TRANSPORTER TO EMERGENCY USE ONLY. THE SHIP'S DILITHIUM CRYSTALS ARE DETERIORATING STEADILY, AND THE SHIP IS DOWN TO 58% POWER. WE'LL HAVE TO HOARD ENERGY AFTER THIS. MORE FIGURES: THOSE SHORT-RANGE "SHUTTLECRAFT" HAVE TO BE SAVED FOR EMERGENCIES, TOO. I DON'T WANT TO TAKE THE WHOLE CREW DOWN IN THE SUNFIRE, BUT I MAY HAVE NO CHOICE. THAT'S THE WAY WE ORIGINALLY PLANNED, AND WHAT THE SHIP'S DESIGNED FOR, BUT I KEEP REMEMBERING THE CRASH OF THE OLD VENTURE, ON A BETTER LANDING-SITE THAN THIS WILL BE, AND I'D RATHER NOT RISK THEM ALL....

ANOTHER REPORT, FROM JEAN BATTRE-LE-DIABLE. GOOD NEWS, THIS TIME: KIRK'S HAVING A FINE REUNION WITH HIS CREW - THOSE THAT CAME UP, ANYWAY. I'M GLAD TO HEAR IT. HE NEEDS SOMETHING LIKE THIS. I THINK HE'S IN BAD SHAPE, AND I CAN'T TELL HOW MUCH OF IT IS JUST LETTING GO, NOW THAT THERE'S REASON TO HOPE, AND HOW MUCH IS REAL TROUBLE OVER THIS DOUBLE-IDENTITY BUSINESS. HE WANTS TO SEE ME AS A TWIN SISTER, WHICH IS CONVENIENT BUT HAS CERTAIN DRAWBACKS: FOR ONE THING THERE'S INCEST-HORROR OVER WHAT HE'S ALREADY DONE, AND FOR ANOTHER THING HE'S NOW WITHOUT A MATE - WHICH ISN'T AT ALL GOOD FOR HIM. HIS ASSURANCE THAT HE'D MANAGE FOR HIMSELF STRIKES ME AS PURE BLUFF. I KNOW HE CAN'T GET ANYWHERE AMONG MY PEOPLE WITHOUT HELP: HE DOESN'T KNOW WHO'S ATTACHED AND WHO'S NOT, HE DOESN'T KNOW OUR COURTING PROCEDURES, AND HE DOESN'T HAVE THE PATIENCE OR TIME FOR COURTING ANYWAY. IT'S POSSIBLE THAT HE HAS A MATE AMONG HIS OWN PEOPLE, WHICH WOULD BE GOOD IF IT'S TRUE; BUT FROM WHAT I'VE SEEN OF PEOPLE COMING OUT OF EXILE THERE'S A LONG AWKWARD PERIOD BEFORE RELATIONSHIPS CAN RESUME. I DON'T THINK HE'LL HAVE MUCH LUCK RIGHT AWAY, AND HE NEEDS SOMEBODY NOW - THIS VERY NIGHT. I'LL PUT WORD OUT TO WATCH AND SEE HOW HE MANAGES. IF HE CAN OBTAIN A MATE TONIGHT, ALL WELL AND GOOD. IF HE CAN'T, WE'LL HAVE TO SEND HIM SOMEONE IMMEDIATELY. I DON'T THINK I'LL HAVE TO LOOK FAR FOR VOLUNTEERS: THIS COULD BE THE SOLUTION FOR OUR DRONE'S PROBLEM.

Uhura sat at the desk in her cabin, idly reviewing technical tapes, not really seeing them, just waiting. Her worn uniform itched and she longed to replace it with one of her soft caftans, but he might come in any time and she couldn't afford to let him see her out of uniform. No, informality of any kind would make this more difficult. He must see nothing but the Communications Officer, armored in Starfleet discipline, confronting him with an officer's arguments rather than a woman's. That's what the problem is, anyway! she thought, fiercely punching off the viewer. If I hadn't been an officer, saddled with that old crunching sense of responsibility, I might not have taken it so badly....

She pressed her hands against her eyes, seeing as clearly as yesterday the scene beyond the opened cabin door, the grimly soaked and puddled rug, the two limp bodies on the floor.... No, that isn't true either, she decided. If I'd been the lowest-ranking ensign, if I'd been no more than a civilian passenger, if I'd been "a woman first" and nothing second, I still would have felt the same. Besides being good officers, they were my friends! The loss of a whole universe was too big to comprehend at first, but their deaths brought it home to me. I can't forget, and it will be a long time before I can forgive....

The long-familiar, long-expected knock sounded on the door. Although she'd been expecting it for hours, it still made her jump. Uhura took a deep breath, straightened out her worn uniform, and went to the door. It was the Captain. Of course. They stood looking at each other in silence for a long moment, weighing the stress of the last four months on each other's faces.

"May I come in?" he asked, as simply as a child.

"Of course, Captain." Uhura led the way to the chairs, making the usual polite gesture of a hostess, offering him a drink even though there was nothing but water available and they both knew it.

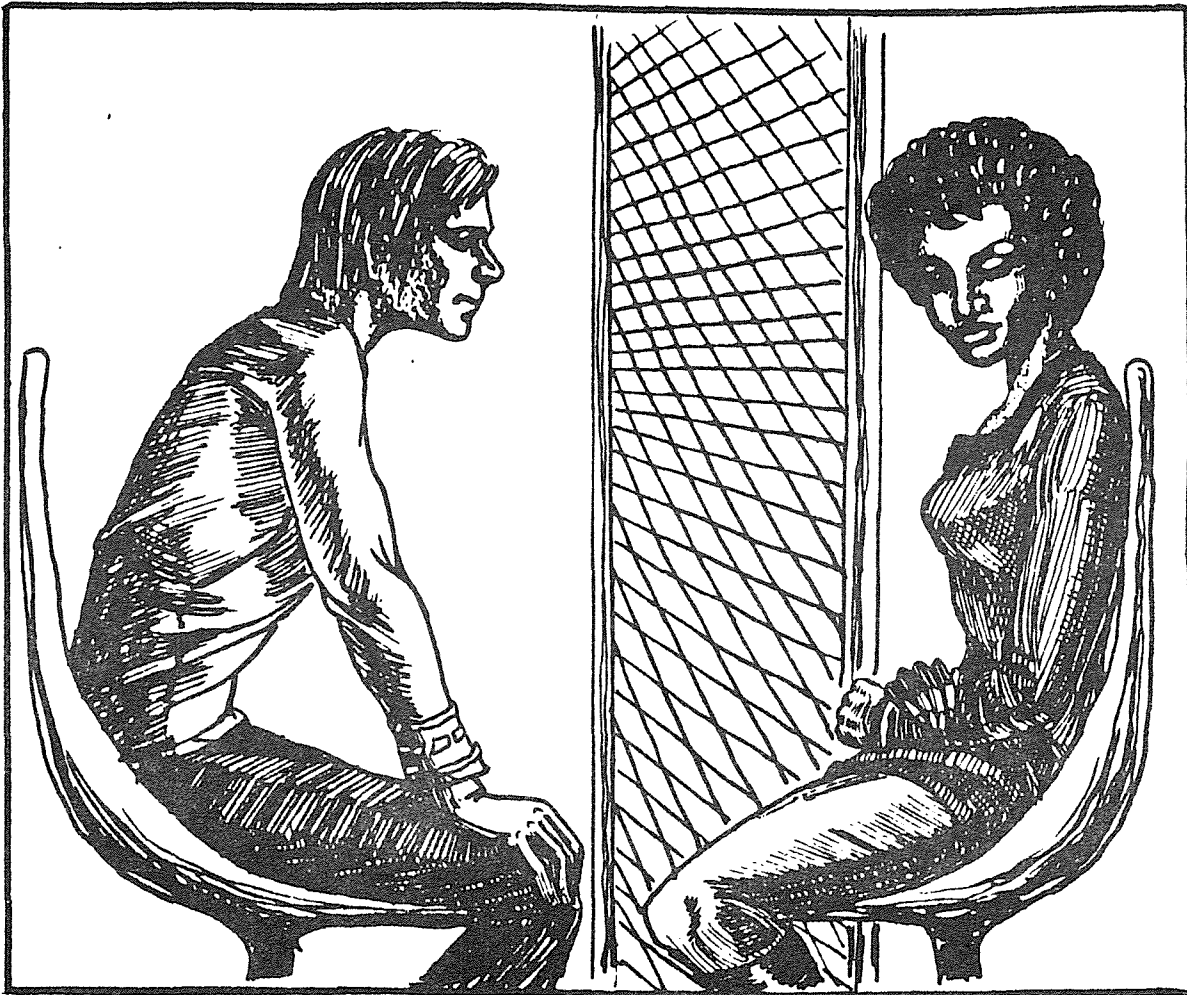
Kirk settled in a chair, studied his hands for a moment, then made himself look at her face. "I'm glad you came back," he said. "I didn't know if you would, after...everything."

"Sir, you said that you had found a way to take us back to our own time-line." It took care to keep her voice calm and level and still audible. "It was my duty to come back. You'll need the skills of an experienced communications officer." Her face gave away nothing. That took effort, too.

"Is that the only reason, Uhura?"

"Yes." The single word was the hardest of all. Leave it at that, damn you! Take the hint and go!

Kirk could take the hint; he could see where the battle lines were drawn, see that he was already defeated, but he couldn't give up without some kind of struggle. "We've both had a season to get over the shock, think things through; and now there's a way of setting it right," he insisted. "Isn't there any way you can forgive me? 'Penny, is everything finished between us?"



Yes! she thought. Say the word, and send him away! "For now, Captain," was what she said. Oh damn! Why does he always affect me that way? Now I'll have to explain... "For now, I'm afraid, the wounds are a little too fresh. That's true for you, I think, as much as for me. What could we say to each other with that memory still between us? Not yet, Captain. Just...not...yet." Fool! Not he'll never go away! He'll keep tagging after me, hoping and hoping, with those big expressive eyes sunk like tunnels in his thin, sad face.... Oh, stop it!

"But the future is open," he said. Then he realized how that sounded, and laughed. It was nothing like his old laughter. "Will you reconsider when I get us back to our own time-line? Is that what it takes to win you? Most fair maidens are satisfied with a freshly killed dragon...."

"Stop it!" she almost shouted. "That's only what we have to do! You know as well as I do that it won't bring M'Ress and Arex back!" Oh, I didn't mean to say it! I tried to avoid it, I really did....

"It won't bring back Spock or Bones, either," Kirk answered very quietly. "The inevitable risks of Star-fleet service - that's the way we have to look at it."

"Captain...." No way out. Get it over with. "If I'd been responsible for the deaths of your friends, how long would it take you to forgive me?"

It hurt him as much as she'd expected that it would. Uhura watched the spasm of pain burn across his face, and wished to all the gods of her ancestors that she'd never loved him. This is crueller than the first time, when I flew in his face and called him every filthy word I could think of, just after I came up from finding the bodies.... Oh, Djamballa! Poor Arex like a broken tree, and M'Ress' gold eyes dulled at last.... They'd cut each other's throats. It made such horribly clear sense! So obviously alien, no way of disguising it - how could they survive in a world like this? No other way out, for them. No other way out for me, now, either....

"All right," said Kirk, getting to his feet. "I can understand. Can't blame you." He made it as far as the door before he turned. "But it's still possible someday, isn't it, Pendy?"

"Someday, Captain." Uhura even managed to smile as she let him go.

Kirk walked out, down the corridor, ignoring the greetings of occasional passing Anarchists, and unaware of the thoughtful glances that followed him. He went straight to his own cabin, through the office section to the living quarters, and threw himself down on his bed without even taking off his boots. If he had been the kind of man who could let himself cry, he would have howled like a dying wolf.

Project Tape R-63, Roantree recording.

LAY OFF, SPARKS, I'M RECORDING. UH...I'M IN OUR ROOM RIGHT NOW, AND I WAS GETTING MY BACK RUBBED WHEN JEAN BATTRE-LE-DIABLE CAME IN WITH THE LATEST ON KIRK. HE LEFT THE PARTY, WENT TO SEE A WOMAN OF HIS PEOPLE, CAME OUT A FEW MINUTES LATER LOOKING LIKE DEATH WARMED OVER, AND WENT TO HIS ROOM. HE'S STILL THERE. EASY TO GUESS WHAT HAPPENED. POOR, PROUD BASTARD! IF HE'D HAVE LET ME ARRANGE THINGS FOR HIM HE WOULDN'T HAVE GOTTEN HURT; NOW I'LL HAVE TO MANAGE IT ANYWAY. QUANNA JUST LEFT. I HOPE THAT'S THE LAST PROBLEM I'LL HAVE TO DEAL WITH UNTIL I'VE HAD MY SLEEP OUT. LORD OF LIGHT, BUT I'M TIRED.... A LITTLE LOWER, SPARKS. THERE. MMM....

Kirk lay on his side, curled into a tight ball of misery. The first wild stabs of pain had subsided into a deep ache of loss, and all he wanted now was to lie still and not have to think. It would be easier if he could sleep, but he couldn't do that. He thought of asking the Anarchists' doctor for something to make him sleep, but feared that he might call Sickbay only to be answered by Christine Chapel - and he didn't want to face her just now. She lost Spock and McCoy, too, he thought. No, another scene like this tonight would break me for good.

When the tapping sounded on his door his first thought was to ignore it. At the second knock he thought it might be Scott, but then judged that the engineer would have rapped harder. When the tapping came a third time he raised up on one elbow and irritably called, "Come in, it isn't locked."

The door opened and shut again behind Quannechota Two-Feathers.

What the hell? Kirk wondered as she padded calmly across the office and into the living-quarters. I don't want to argue theoretical physics tonight.... Is there some trouble with the ship or crew? Oh please, not now! "What's the problem?" he asked.

"There is no problem," said Quannechota, as she pulled off her headband. Then she pulled off her boots. Kirk didn't realize what was happening until she took off her shirt.

"Wait! Wait just a goddamned minute!" he yelled, scrambling backwards across the bed. "Quanna, what the hell do you think you're doing?"

"That should be obvious," she replied, unfastening her belt.

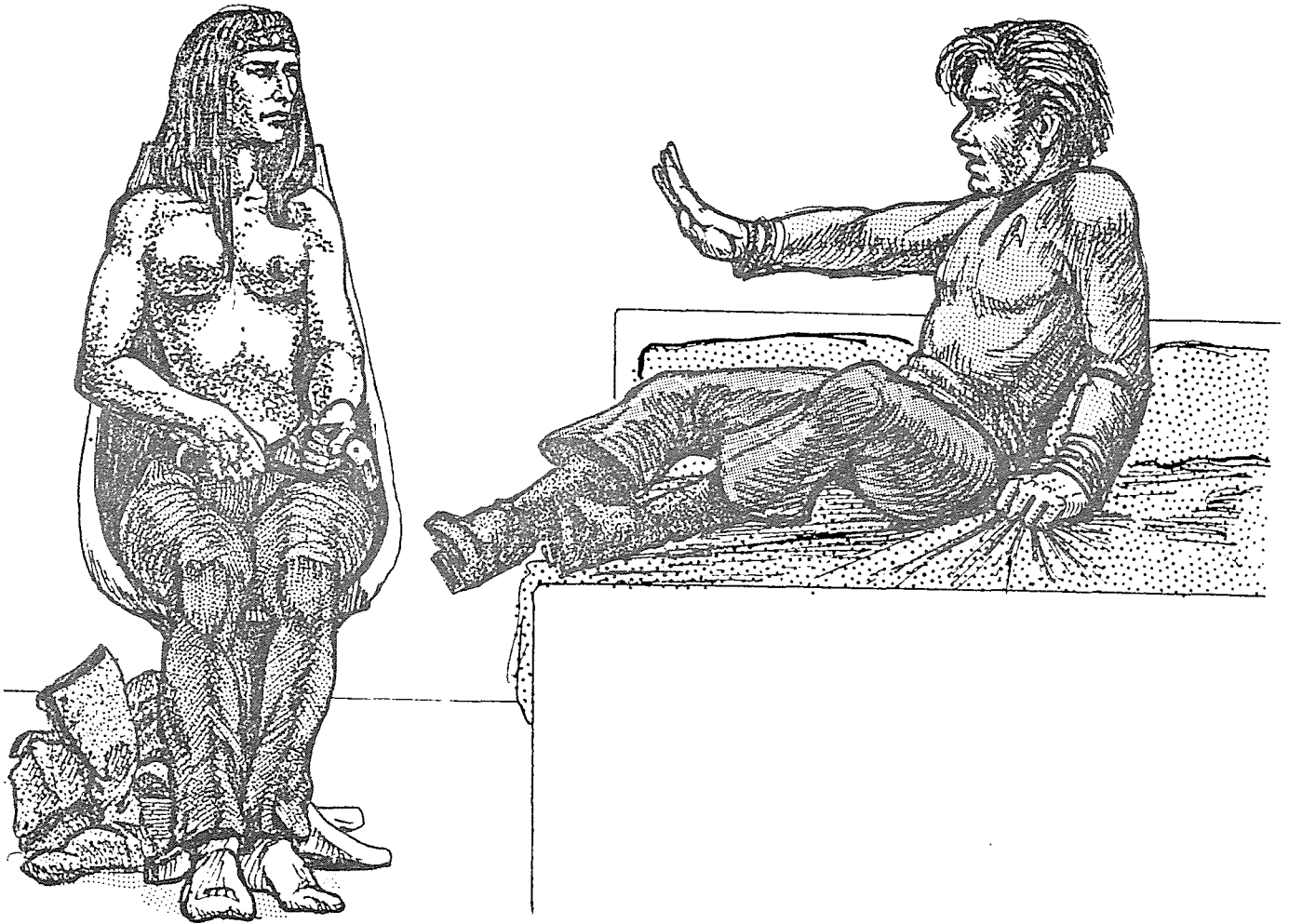
"No! Stop! Stop right there!" He pressed his back hard against the bulkhead. "Don't you dare take off those pants! I don't - I didn't ask for - Oh my God, has everybody gone crazy, or just me?"

Quannechota's hands stopped where they were. "Do you find me repulsive?" she asked, quite calmly, except that her French accent was slightly stronger than usual.

"Oh, no, no...." Crazy or not, I know better than to answer "yes" to a question like that! "I just - I - Look, dammit, I'd rather choose a woman for myself. Do you mind?"

"I see no other woman here. You are alone for the night."

"Yes, alone!" Kirk snapped. "And I don't see that it's any of your goddamned business!"



"Your health is of great concern to all of us," Quannechota replied implacably. "You are suffering from the effects of prolonged isolation, and need help to recover quickly. You should not spend a night alone."

"Concerned for my health? Oh, fine! I suppose you're just what the doctor ordered: a walking prescription!"

"Yes," said Quannechota, not batting an eye.

"Oh, shit." Kirk slumped against the wall and rested his face in his hands. "Look, Quanna," he explained wearily. "I'm not angry with you. I know you mean well, and I appreciate it. It isn't that I don't, ah, find you attractive...." Liar. I've seen prettier faces on hatchets, and she's built like a rail. Not ugly, but certainly plain. Definitely not my type. "It's just that...well, it's been a hard day for me, and I'm just not in the mood. I'm sorry."

Undaunted, Quannechota held up her hands and spread her fingers wide. "If you are fatigued," she said, "then at the very least you are in need of the "Lomi," and I am quite skilled at it, having learned from Sparks, whose technique you know. Afterwards you may take some interest in mating. If so, you need not fear to tire yourself; I will do all the work."

"All right, all right," Kirk capitulated. God, I can't get rid of her! "I guess I could use a back-rub. I don't promise you anything else, though."

"As you wish," said Quannechota.

She stood up and pulled off her rough denim pants, revealing small hips and long, thin muscular legs. Legs like a race-horse's, Kirk thought. And what's that? And her tatoo? Why there? Centered on her navel

was an artificial mark, a circle inset with an inverted triangle. The three arcs of the circle were different colors - green turquoise, and sky-blue. The triangle within was black, and in the center of that her navel was colored dark red. Kirk winced just thinking of how the getting of it must have hurt. He vaguely remembered seeing a similar mark on Jenneth - though he hadn't been in any mood to study it then - but that had been much paler, the triangle more of a light brown. Also, now that he thought of it, Jenneth's tatoo hadn't been cut across, like Quanna's, with a thin silver scar. As if someone had tried to erase it with a knife, he thought, shuddering.

"Quanna, what does that tatoo mean?" he asked, remembering that all the Anarchists' odd marks had some significance.

For an instance Quannechota's face went blanker than usual. She replied, quite calmly, "It is the visible sign of Materra, the Great Mother of All Living. It signifies love of life, and...and the hope of life's continuance." She sat down on the bed and began pulling off Kirk's boots.

"I see. You worship science and freedom and life itself. Well, there are worse things to worship.... No, no, I can take off the rest myself. Hmmm...Sun, Moon and Earth? 'Ma-terra?' Mother Earth?"

"Yes," said Quanna, looking away from him.

"Are they individualized in some way? Why is yours darker than Jenneth's?"

"Different hair color." Her voice was totally expressionless.

Kirk puzzled over that, unfastened his belt, and cast about nervously for another topic of conversation. He couldn't think of much. "How did you get that scar across the tatoo? Were you hurt there?"

Quannechota closed her eyes very tight, and her hands clenched on the bed cover. "Yes...." she said with effort. She drew a long, difficult breath, forced her eyes open, and made herself look at him. "I did it myself, on the advice of our doctor. It means that I am not fit for breeding. I have been pregnant nine times and produced no...no viable children. There is proven genetic damage. No man in High Harbor, or in our whole world, can give me healthy children. In our triple, I am the Drone."

"'Drone'...then that's why you...." Kirk stared at her, utterly horrified. "You volunteered, or they sent you, because you thought...I...."

"Yes. You have no scars on your genes. Perhaps you may succeed in giving me a child that can live."

For an instant her wooden-Indian mask slipped, and Kirk looked on a misery as deep as his own - and it was none of his doing, and he might be the cure. Right then he decided that no matter what else he did, somehow, in some way, he would make this woman happy. "I'll do my best," he said, pulling off the last of his clothing in one steady motion. After all, it isn't the first time I've played the stud-horse.... he thought, remembering a woman called Deela. Hell, I can think of far less pleasant duties!

As he stretched out on the bed, Quannechota leaned over him and began rubbing his shoulders. "No, that's not necessary," he said, taking her wrists and tugging her down beside him. "Let me lead." She blinked in surprise, but acquiesced. He slipped one arm around her neck, feeling her long black hair part like a curtain of rough silk, pulled her face close and kissed her very slowly and thoroughly. Her mouth was warm and salty, and he liked the way her tongue flicked back at him. Her hair smelled of pine-smoke, and he ran his fingers through it, surprised at how thick and cool it was. His other hand meandered from her long throat to her small firm breast, intrigued by the rough warm feel of her skin. Not my type, he thought again, but interesting... interesting....

He pulled his mouth away from hers and began laying a long track of kisses down her throat. She sighed and stretched under him, relaxing slowly. He watched her face softening imperceptibly, losing its wooden stiffness, and he wondered how it would look when flushed and expressive. She might almost be beautiful, he thought, sliding his hand down the centerline of her smooth indrawn belly. One of his fingers snagged in the middle

of her tatoo, and she arched upward, gasping, dark eyes wide. Puzzled, he looked down - and suddenly understood exactly what the tatoo represented. First he blushed all the way down to his toenails, then he laughed, then he slipped down beside her and kissed her boldly in the center of the tatoo. Quanna gave a long, shivering sigh - and then the last resistance melted away, and her hands slid upward and closed on his back. Kirk laughed to himself as he resumed the slow tracking of kisses, running from the image toward the reality, feeling the growing tremors in her body. The stirring was just beginning in himself, and he knew he could take the time to be thorough, to enjoy watching her change. The love-bout would be a long one, but he already knew he was winning, and that was a victory his scarred spirit badly needed.

Captain's Log, Stardate 6059.6.

...STRANGE...STRANGE, BUT GOOD. NOT MY TYPE, OR JUST NOT WHAT I'M USED TO? SOMETHING COMPLETELY DIFFERENT... IT'S NEVER BEEN QUITE LIKE THAT BEFORE. I DID THINGS I NEVER THOUGHT I'D DO WITH ANYONE, AND I TOOK MORE TIME THAN I'VE EVER DONE BEFORE, AND I WASN'T THINKING ABOUT MY OWN FEELINGS AT ALL BUT ONLY OF MAKING HER HAPPY - AND BY GOD, I ENJOYED IT! I DON'T KNOW WHEN I'VE FELT BETTER. I SLEPT FOR NEARLY 10 HOURS AFTERWARDS, AND WOKE UP FEELING AS IF I'D BEEN...WELL, MELTED DOWN AND RECAST. EVERYTHING SEEMS NEW AND FRESH AND SCRUBBED CLEAN. WHAT ARE THESE WEIRD ANARCHIST WOMEN DOING TO ME, ANYWAY?

ENOUGH OF THAT. I HAVE TO ARRANGE A MEETING BETWEEN MY SECTION CHIEFS AND JENNETH'S, SO WE CAN PLAN THE MOON LANDING AND SET UP THE MINING EQUIPMENT. ALSO, WE SHOULD CHECK OUT THE SUNFIRE; I NEVER DID GET TO SEE THE INSIDE OF IT, AND WE HAVE TO MAKE SURE THAT THE PRIMITIVE LITTLE SHIP CAN GET THE EQUIPMENT DOWN SAFELY. ALSO, I'D BETTER CHECK OUT THE DILITHIUM CRYSTALS AGAIN, OR ASK SCOTTY IF HE'S DONE IT, AND SEE HOW MUCH POWER THE ENTERPRISE STILL HAS.

Behind him Quannechota stretched and purred and climbed out of bed. Kirk smiled, clicked off the recorder and went to lean on the dividing screen and watch her dress. For some reason, watching her slip the rough constraining cloth over her skin seemed subtly erotic. Odd, he considered. I've never thought of it that way before. I guess I was always more interested in getting clothes off.... Quanna glanced up at him and smiled. He smiled back, remembering how beautiful she could be when she was passionate, and bent over and kissed her.

"Yes," she laughed gently. "Now I can truly believe that you are Jenneth."

"How do you mean?" Kirk asked, wishing she hadn't brought up that subject.

"You make love the same way," Quannechota said, fastening her belt. "She too takes much time, and enjoys my pleasure at least as much as her own. Her kisses are like yours, and her caresses also. She too likes to watch me dress afterwards. Indeed, there is only one noticeable difference between you - and that I like very much." She pushed back her hair and smiled into his eyes. "It is very good to have a man again."

"You mean, you...she...." Kirk took a step backward and clutched the dividing screen for support. "It's you and her, not you and Sparks?" My God, so that's how they do it! The nightmare - or vision - I.... Jenneth was between them. That means - Oh my Lord, my sister's queer! ...But she's not my sister, she's...that means I could - Oh no! No! We're different people! She's somebody else, not me! Not me!

"No, not Sparks," Quannechota sighed. "Our birth control is not very efficient, and I am lamentably fertile. I can breed, but not properly bear. For safety, I could not have men in the usual way - not until we found you. I was content with Jenneth, but it is not quite the same."

"I see," Kirk muttered, not daring to let go of the screen. It's logical, as Spock would say, but it's still horrible! Goddamn you, Jenneth Roantree! You and your people and your society and your whole goddamn universe - you're all perverted! I can't wait to get out of here. I've got to get out of here.... "Ah, well, I hate to kiss and run, but it's getting late, and I have a meeting to attend to, and people will be wondering where I am and I'm sorry but I just have to leave!"

He turned and fled, feeling Quannechota's puzzled eyes on him all the way down the corridor.

I DON'T KNOW WHAT HAPPENED, BUT JIM WAS IN AN EDGY MOOD WHEN HE SHOWED UP ON THE BRIDGE. I CAN'T IMAGINE WHY; HE'S HAD MORE THAN 10 HOURS SLEEP, PLUS A GOOD ROLL WITH QUANNA, WHICH SHOULD BE ENOUGH TO CONTENT ANYBODY. I THOUGHT HE'D BE PLEASED TO HEAR THAT WE'VE ALREADY CHECKED OUT THE SHIP'S POWER AND PLANNED THE MOON LANDING AND WE'RE READY TO GO OVER AND INSPECT THE SUNFIRE; INSTEAD HE ACTED GROUCHY AND MADE A CRYPTIC COMMENT ABOUT ME GETTING IN AHEAD OF HIM EVERYWHERE IN THIS UNIVERSE. WHAT'S THAT SUPPOSED TO MEAN? WHAT EXACTLY IS BOTHERING HIM? I'LL HAVE TO WORRY ABOUT IT LATER. WE'RE DUE TO INSPECT THE SUNFIRE IN A FEW MINUTES, AND I HAVE TO GO GET INTO MY SUIT.

Slowly, clumsily, they climbed out of the hatchway - Roantree, Bailey and Sparks in their three-layered suits, Scotty swearing at the awkwardness of his space-armor and marvelling at the "contraptions" that the Anarchists wore, Kirk almost hiding inside his armor and saying no more than absolutely necessary. Scott laughed in amazement as he saw how the Anarchists had kept the Sunfire from drifting away from the Enterprise.

"A rope! A mooring cable!" he cackled. "Ho! Ho! Aye, it'd work, but - heh! Tyin' up a spaceship wi' a rope! I never thought I'd see such a sight. Weel, 'tis handy; we won't need oor jets after all; we can just hand-o'er-hand it up you hawser ta the nearest port. Come on, lads."

He whistled jauntily, the echoes rattling in his helmet, as he led the way along the cable to the Anarchist ship. He was enjoying himself thoroughly, and his mood spread to the rest of the party, even Kirk. I've never seen the inside of an old-style chemical rocket, Kirk thought as he pulled himself into the Sunfire's airlock. I wonder how these primitives managed it....

Beyond the hatch was a narrow, round chamber the diameter of the ship, with a thick central shaft running through it and large sealed ports in both of its flat walls. Kirk couldn't see much else; aside from their suit-lights, the chamber was totally dark.

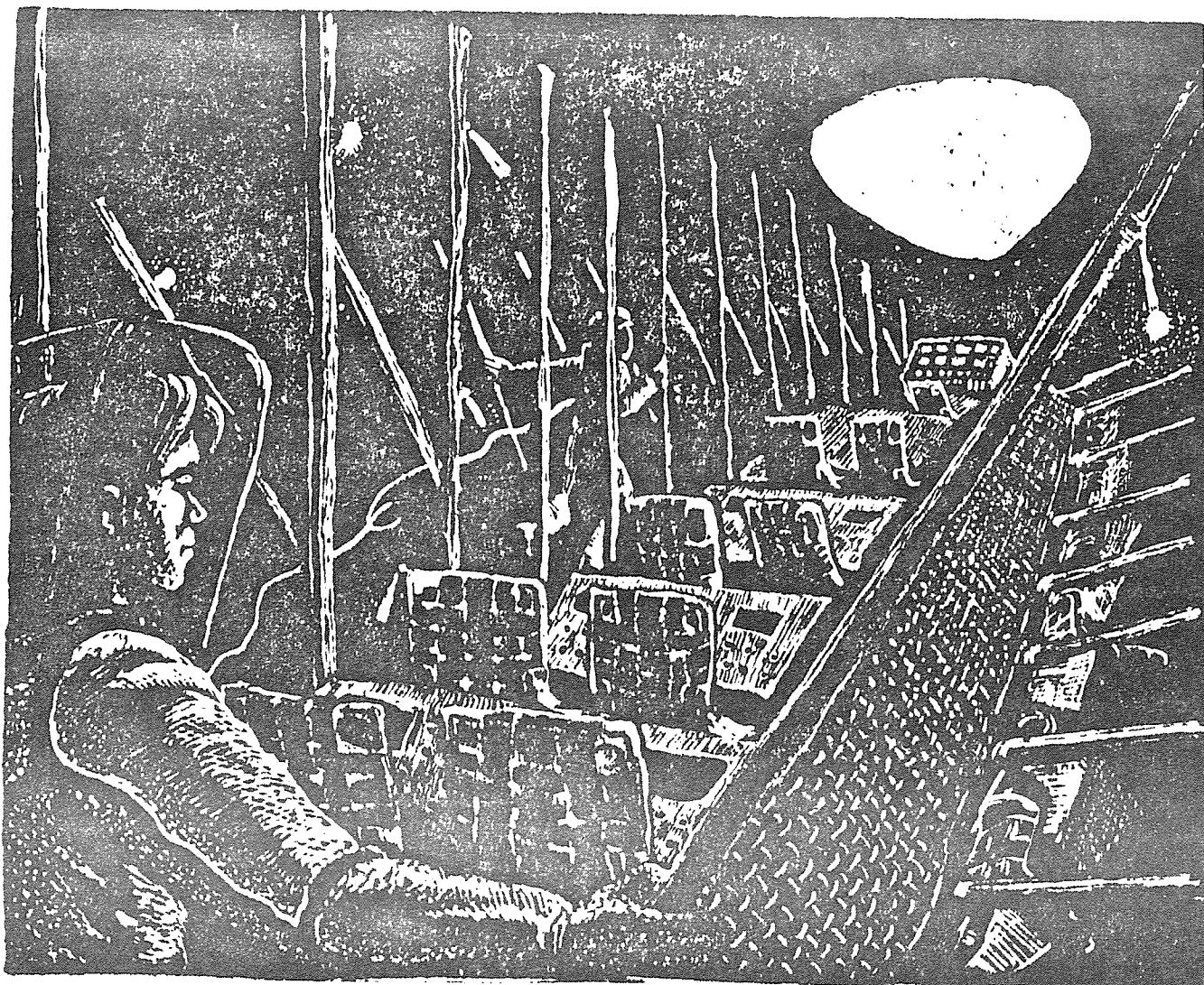
"The lights died while we were knocking about on your ship," Roantree explained, running her hands over the bulkheads. "Just a minute, and I'll break some new ones."

Died? Break? Kirk wondered, watching her hands close on a small tube hung from a wall-bracket. She bent it sharply in the middle, shook it hard, and touched a tiny disc at the base. A soft green glow filled the tube, casting pale light on the rest of the chamber, illuminating other hand-holds strung with tubes. The Anarchists climbed from bracket to bracket, grasping tubes, bending and shaking and prodding them, until the chamber was filled with a pale green glow.

"Luciferin chemical lamps!" Scott exclaimed. "Aye, we use 'em for emergency torches, but they only last 36 hours or so. An' how do ye make 'em glow in the dead cold?"

"Little batteries in their bases keep 'em warm enough," Bailey explained as she opened the inner hatches. "With any luck we'll land before they run down, and if not, well, we've got plenty more. Now, who's going up to Control and who's coming to look at the engines?"

When the small stampede was over, Kirk and Roantree were the only ones left who went through the near hatch into the Control section. Kirk, knowing nothing of the ship's arrangement and having nothing to say to Roantree anyway, waited by the hatch while she moved ahead through the dark chamber. He marked her progress by the budding glow of the Luciferin tubes, impressed by the undeniably eerie effect of the green lamps slowly revealing the ship's interior. Up the center of the chamber ran a thick column of heavy steel-mesh screens, and under the screens lay steel tubes and shafts and cables - controls of some sort. Along the surface of the screens lay larger tubes, apparently made of reinforced plastic, running in bundles to skeletal couches that were arranged around the column in ranked circles of six. In front of each couch stood a small console-cabinet with a button-studded control panel and a small monitor screen, and each console was fed by cables that emerged from the central column. Consoles and couches were braced by thin steel tubes that ran from the column to the bulkheads, like spokes of a wheel, with enough space between them to allow relatively easy passage.



Kirk watched Roantree moving confidently through the tangle of brace-spokes and pictured her as a spider in an orderly steel web. The image didn't hold. As the pale green light filled the chamber it gave the effect of moonlight playing on the naked girders of a half-completed building, through which Roantree climbed with the easy confidence of a construction worker. "Come on up, Jim," she called, her voice distorted by the suit's god-awful radio. "I'm up here under the portholes."

Kirk followed her up the column, intrigued despite himself by how easily he could move in the null gravity by pulling himself through the web of braces. He counted the circles of couches as he passed; there were nine of them, enough for Roantree's entire crew. Apparently the Anarchist shipbuilders had no conception of a separate bridge or engineering section; everybody was lumped in the same chamber. Beyond the ninth circle the central column ended in a large console that joined the forward bulkheads where they narrowed toward the ship's conical nose. The console was covered with monitor screens, buttons, switches, and a few massive lever-handles. Two couches were set on opposite sides of it, and Roantree was sitting in one of them.

"This is my place," she said, barely glancing up from her study of the console. "Quanna sits on the other side as back-up pilot, in case I miss anything. This bank of screens ties in with everyone else's screens, so I can see if someone needs help. This second bank - the larger screen, there - covers the outside views so I can see where I'm going. Those portholes above us are the 'suicide back-ups' for the outside monitors; if the cameras break down, I can always turn my head and look straight out. Not terribly effective, but better than nothing in a pinch. These dials control the monitor screens, these the steering jets, and these the main jet. These switches turn on the electric generator, and these out in the emergency batteries in case the generator goes out. These big levers are the emergency manual overrides and lock-breaks; in a real squeeze I can jettison the engine and cargo sections and steer the Control section down on its auxiliary engine. That's what we passed

in that first chamber. The other chair over there is for piloting the Control section alone, but it has a bank of monitor screens, too. They're connected by different systems, so that if my console shorts out Quanna can keep track of things on hers....

"Uh-huh," Kirk mumbled, taking in the whole incredibly primitive design. As his eyes adjusted to the soft green light he saw still more proof of the little ship's barbarism. "My Lord, it's made of wood! Wood! Steel hull, steel bracing, but all the rest wood - and leather! The seats, the consoles, even the buttons - And I'll swear those screens look as if they were made of old-fashioned glass!"

"Yes, they are," Roantree turned and frowned at him. "Good quality steel is costly and hard to get. We had to trade with the Luddites in Escanaba, a couple hundred miles north, and bring the pig-iron down the lake and up the river in flatboats. We had to be sparing with metal wherever possible, and we had plenty of wood and leather, so...." she shrugged.

"And you're planning to go to the moon in this incredible crate?" Kirk forgot himself. "I can't see how it even got off the ground!"

The look that flashed across Roantree's face made him want to kick himself. Idiot! Never insult another Captain's ship! ...especially not when she's doing you a favor with it, giving you a gift as big as the whole universe....

"If you really are my brother," Roantree said, very quietly and dangerously, "then I'll thank you not to treat me as a poor relation. You don't have to rub my nose in the fact that your ship is hundreds of years more advanced than mine, or that your people are richer than mine, or that you've strolled among stars while I have yet to set foot on my own planet's moon. I already know that, thank you. You don't have to belittle the little I've got."

"I'm sorry, Jenneth. It was a stupid thing to say. I guess I'm just so frantic to get the job done that I let my temper get away from me." And I'm a damn fool not to have understood. In this or any other universe, James T. Kirk - in whatever form - is a Captain first and last.

"All right." Roantree grudgingly accepted the apology. "But understand this, Brother Jim; my poor antiquated little crate will get my crew and equipment to the moon, and we will dig out your crystals, and we will set time straight again. That's something you and your crew and your super-ship couldn't do."

"I know it." How well I know!

"Okay then." She relaxed and smiled again. "And your ship depends on the efficiency of mine, so let's check out the systems in this 'crate' and make sure that she'll do whatever's needed." She turned back to her console. "Go sit in the co-pilot's chair and check out the monitor screens as I go over the checklist."

Kirk obediently climbed into the co-pilot's chair and strapped himself in. Obviously the Sunfire had nothing resembling artificial gravity, and the seatbelt was more than enough to accommodate his space-armor. He worried about that, but didn't say anything. It took only a few minute's study to understand the monitoring board, and when Roantree started calling out screen numbers, he was able to follow her easily. View by view, indicator by indicator, they went over the ship's systems together.

"Damn!" Roantree complained. "The #8 valve is sticking all right, and ~~now~~ the #3's acting up, too." She pressed a stud on her suit's helmet. "Bailey, valves #3 and #8 are sticking. Can you clean them from down there, or will you have to go outside?"

"I can handle the #3 from here," Bailey's voice came back, "but that bastard #8 needs outside work. As soon as we've finished the systems run-down I'll go out and get the ice out of it. The rest of you will have to go over the cargo by yourselves."

"Ice...?" Kirk asked as Roantree turned back to her board. "How did you get ice in your valve?"

"The steering-jets aren't rockets," Roantree explained, frowning over a screen. "They're just valve-lines connected to the water-tank. Sometimes ice collects on the outside of a valve and freezes it shut."

"Oh." Kirk thought that over, and shuddered. "Ah, how do you keep your water-tank from freezing solid, or bursting?"

"That's what happened to the old Venture. After that we took care to reinforce the water-tank, keep the water under pressure and keep it warm from the main jet and the crew's section. I don't think we need to worry about the tank this time - just the valves."

"The Venture? What ship was that?"

"Our first moon rocket, six years ago." Roantree's voice became oddly distant and detached. "It reached the moon, but it crashed on landing. Everybody died."

"I'm sorry," said Kirk. So this isn't their first attempt! They can reach the moon, and if we can help, they could get down safely. The odds look better.... Why did her voice change? Did she know someone on that ship? Don't ask. Not now, anyway.

It was nearly nine hours later that Roantree and Bailey were satisfied with the Sunfire's condition. Other Anarchists had filed in to take their places, and Kirk, Scott, Roantree, Sparks and Bailey departed for the Enterprise amid a chorus of good wishes. As they pulled themselves back down the mooring line, Scott maneuvered himself next to Kirk and began chatting away a mile a minute.

"'Tis incredible, Sir! Yon ship's naethin' but a big chemical torch; two tanks, one full o' alcohol and t'other full o' liquid oxygen - that feed doon ta a valve faced wi' a platinum grill. Ta fire it, they just open some valves and feed in the mix. That's their propulsion system, if ye please! What's more, 'tis only the liquid oxygen tank that's made o' metal! The alcohol tank's naethin' but glazed ceramic reinforced wi' wire mesh! Ma God, they expect...."

"Will the alcohol tank hold up until they land?" Kirk cut in, wondering if the Anarchists could over-hear.

"Hold? Oh, aye, if they don't jar it verra hard. It'll work, it'll all work, but I've never seen nor heard o' anythin' so primitive in ma life! I wouldna trust it wi' the life o' a mouse, much less...."

"Well, we've got to trust it with the fate of a universe!" Kirk snapped. "That ship and her crew, primitive or not, are the most important things in the galaxy right now - and don't forget that."

"Aye, Sir, O' course." Scott was a bit taken back by Kirk's unexpected vehemence. "I wasna insultin' the Anarchists. 'Tis amazin' what they've done. I only meant ta say that I'm worried about 'em. Yon ship's horribly fragile, and as for their suits...."

"Do we have enough spare suits in storage for all of them?"

"Aye, Sir. I've already talked ta one o' their engineers, an' he was checkin' 'em over when we left. They could be persuaded to use our suits, which would improve their chances a bit...." He gave Kirk a calculating look. "Tell ye what, Captain. After we shed these suits and have a bit ta eat, what do ye say we get taegether wi' the rest o' the bridge crew for a wee party? I've a bit o' scotch salted away, an' what wi' the good beer that the Anarchists have managed ta coax oot o' the selector, we could have oorselves a fine time."

Kirk thought for a minute before deciding he had to refuse. "I'm sorry, Scotty, but I don't think I'm up to it. It's been a long day, and I just want to eat and hit the sack. Besides, it wouldn't be fair to - uh, to Chekov, now that he's on the wagon."

"Aye, thot's true...." Scott considered that brief slip, made a good guess, and ventured to add, "Ah, Captain, I take it the lass wouldna forgive?"

How did you know?" Kirk whispered, blushing visibly.

"A ship's like a small toon, Sir. No secrets."

"True, true.... No, she won't forgive me this side of time. But don't worry, I'm - I'll survive."

"I see," said Scott, making another calculated guess. "Aye, the Anarchist women are free and bold lasses, I've seen. Nae doubt they're willin' ta try the paces o' a handsome stranger."

"You're getting sharp in your old age, Scotty."

"Faith, I have ta be," Scott answered with surprising gentleness. "Someone ought ta care, noo that yer best friends are gone."

Kirk stopped and looked at him, then blinked and had to look away. "Thanks, Scotty," he said, very quietly. "You don't know how much I appreciate that."

"Thank ye, Sir." Scott paused, watching the Anarchists slip into the hatch ahead of them. "Sir, I wouldna talk to ye, that time ye called back, only because I was in the middle o' fightin' a fire in the generator room. I didna mean ta be sa abrupt, and I'm sorry for the pain it caused ye. Truly, I am."

"I see..." Kirk sighed as he felt an unexpected weight slide off of him. "It's all right, Scotty. Everything's going to be all right now."

He opened the hatch and they both went into the airlock together.

Project Tape R-70, Roantree recording.

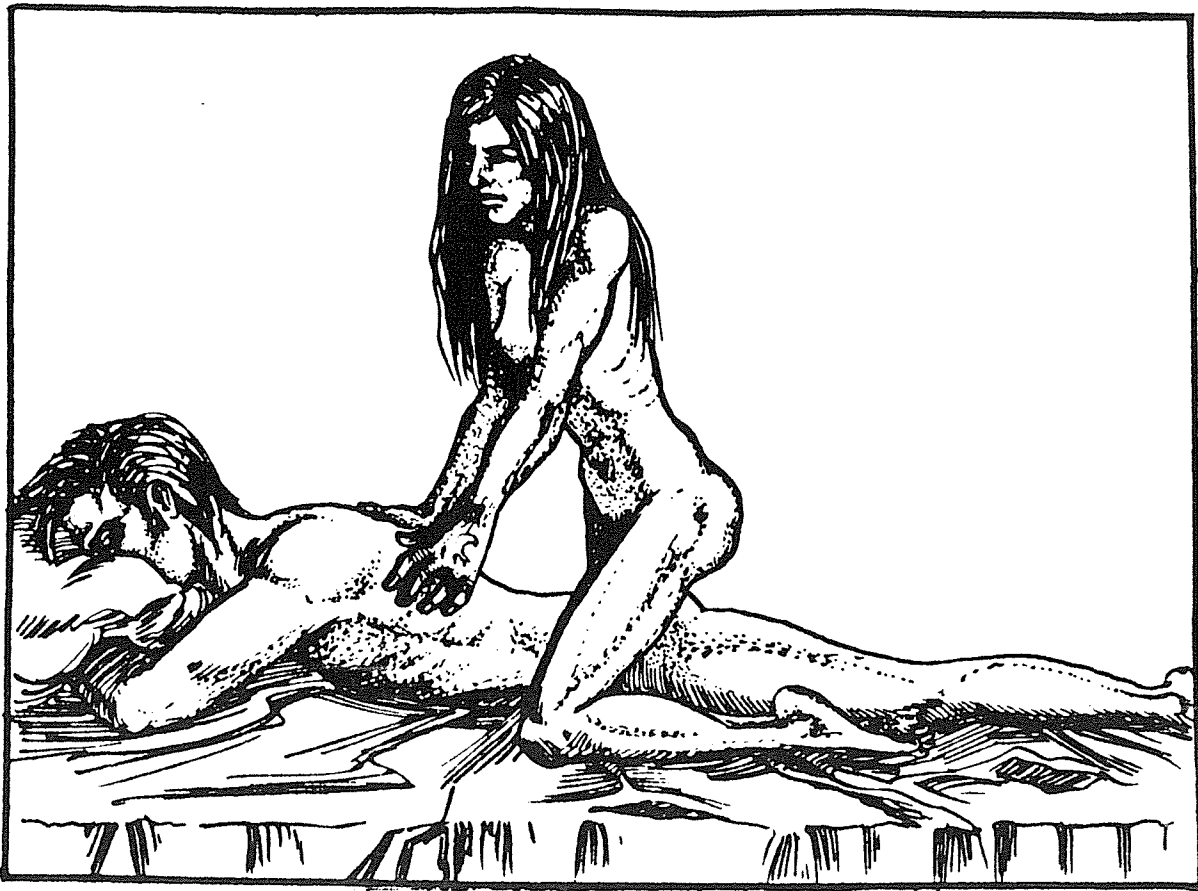
THE SUNFIRE CHECKS OUT CLEAR: BAILEY SAYS THE #8 VALVE IS BACK IN WORKING ORDER, THE MONITORS ARE CLEAN, TANKS TIGHT, ALL SYSTEMS GO. WE LOAD AND START TOMORROW, PLANET DAWN. JACK REINHART SAYS THE SUITS KIRK OFFERED US LOOK VERY GOOD, BUT HE'LL HAVE TO CONFER WITH SPARKS ABOUT COMBINING OUR RADIO SYSTEMS. SOME OF MY PEOPLE DON'T WANT TO CHANGE EQUIPMENT ON SHORT NOTICE, AND WE'LL HAVE TO MAKE BOTH COMMUNICATIONS NETS MESH WELL.

KIRK DIDN'T AVOID ME AT DINNER, BUT HE DIDN'T SAY MUCH, EITHER. HE SEEMS PREOCCUPIED, OR PLAYED OUT. MAYBE HE ISN'T USED TO A 10-HOUR WORK-SHIFT. MAYBE IT'S SOMETHING ELSE. QUANNA SAYS SHE THINKS SHE CAN DEAL WITH IT. I HOPE SO, SINCE I'M TOO BUSY.

THE LAST WORD FROM HIGH HARBOR IS THAT THEY'RE MOVING OUT TOMORROW AT DAWN, SAME AS US. THE CANNIBAL WHEEL'S THROWING A JOINT DEPARTURE-PARTY WITH A SWITCH ON THE USUAL PROCEDURE: THIS TIME IT'S THE DEPARTEES - SPECIFICALLY THE ENTERPRISE - THAT'S GIVING THE PRESENTS. OUR LAST TRANSPORTER ACTIVITY WILL BE SENDING THE WHEEL ENOUGH FOOD TO LAST THEM THREE MONTHS. THEY'LL BE KEEPING CONTACT WITH THE EVACUEES FOR US, RELAYING TO THE ENTERPRISE.

SPARKS IS WORKING ON THAT, AS WELL AS THE SUIT PROBLEM, WITH KIRK'S RADIO CHIEF.... I THINK HER NAME'S "UHURA," BUT I'M NOT SURE: SHE TOLD ME ONCE, BUT GAVE ME SUCH AN INCREDIBLY COLD LOOK THAT I WASN'T ENCOURAGED TO ASK AGAIN. I DON'T UNDERSTAND THAT. HAVE I OFFENDED HER IN SOME WAY? I CAN'T IMAGINE HOW.... WELL, IT'S NOT MY PROBLEM. LET SPARKS DEAL WITH HER. I'VE A FEW MILLION OTHER WORRIES, AND THERE'S SO LITTLE TIME TO PLANET DAWN. I OUGHT TO MAKE THE USUAL GOOD-LUCK CELEBRATION WITH SPARKS, BUT WE'RE BOTH TOO BUSY AND TIRED. I WONDER HOW QUANNA'S DOING?

Sure enough, Quannechota was sitting on the bed, waiting for him. Kirk stopped short when he saw her, and rocked on his heels, and tried to make sense out of the sudden chaos of his feelings. Item one, he decided, I'm too tired for sex right now. Item two, I'm not sure I really want a...a...well, another woman's...Drone. Item three, I'm not sure of what I feel about her...or Jenneth, for that matter, and I don't want any more emotional complications. I've had enough of that in the last few months to last me a lifetime. "I'm sorry, Quanna," he finally said. "It's been a long day, and I've been working hard, and I'm afraid I'm just too tired."



In reply, Quannechota merely held up her hands with the fingers spread wide. Kirk began to feel as if he were a tape set on replay. "All right," he surrendered, taking off his shirt. "I suppose I'll have cramps if I don't." He sat down and took off his boots, let her help with the rest, and stretched out on the bed. Quanna undressed too, sat down beside him, and calmly began rubbing his back. He had to admit that it did feel good; her long hard fingers had a surprising talent for untying knots that he hadn't known were there.

"I have had no chance to speak with the Braider," she said. "How goes our ship?"

"It checked out fine," Kirk mumbled, his face pressed into the pillow. "It'll get to the moon all right. Sufficient.... Efficient little ship. Our ancestors made the first space-flights in ships like that. She'll do...."

"I am pleased to hear it. If all is well, a co-pilot will not be required, and I may stay here and monitor energy outlays through your ship's computer."

"And take care of me, I suppose." Kirk smiled a little at the thought. She wants to stay here. Sure, she loves that computer, but maybe that's only an excuse.... Maybe she likes me. "Mmmm, your hands feel good..."

"I am grateful." Her tone grew cautious. "Have I displeased you in some way, or offended against your customs?"

"Huh? What do you mean?" Kirk half-turned his head to look at her.

"This morning you were in great haste to leave me, and you took care to avoid speaking to me until this evening. I do not understand this, and can only conclude that I have upset you in some fashion. Could you explain this to me?"

"Oh. That. No, it isn't your fault...." He buried his face in the pillow, suddenly furious at himself. It isn't even Jenneth's fault, he thought. She's simply making the best of a bad situation. How can I pass judgment? I don't know what it's like to live in a world with widespread genetic problems, insufficient technology and medicine, fanatic enemies on every side.... It's an alien universe, and they're all aliens - even

Jenneth. I have no right to judge them by my standards. "I'm sorry," he said. "I just misunderstood something. I really had no right to react that way. It doesn't mean the same thing in my universe as it does here."

"What is not the same? What is the misunderstanding?" Quannechota asked, the motion of her hands never slowing. "Can you explain?"

"I'll try," Kirk sighed, wearily damning her innocent curiosity. "Look, in my universe...." Wait a minute, I can't speak for a whole universe! "Well, in my part of the galaxy...." No, I can't say that all of the Federation worlds, either. "I mean, on my home planet...." Hold it; there are plenty of sub-cultures on Earth that don't care about such things. "Damn! In the culture I was raised in, women didn't make love to other women! I mean, I suppose some women did it - how the hell would I know? But it wasn't approved of. It was against custom. That's why I was...surprised when you told me about you and Jenneth. I didn't expect it, and it...sort of shocked me."

"Ah, I see." Quannechota raised an eyebrow and thought about that. Women with women against custom? Unexpected? Almost unknown? "You mean you could not understand why women should mate with each other?"

"I can't imagine why," Kirk managed to laugh. "Especially with so many willing and unattached males running around."

"Oh!" Yes, among his crew, less than one in three were women. So, there are more men than women where he came from! Ah, and among them there are no tripple marriages.... Perhaps they marry in couples, one man and one woman, or two men together. Do the male couples adopt children, then? "Yes, now I see the sense of it. I regret that our customs upset you. Please understand that our situation is different, and we do as we must."

"Other towns, other customs," Kirk quoted drowsily. "It's all right; I just have to get used to it. Mmmm... that's good...." The steady working of her hands left him feeling utterly boneless. He drifted toward sleep.

Quannechota rubbed awhile longer until she was certain that he was completely relaxed, then got up and turned off the lights, came back to bed, and lay down beside him. He stirred slightly at the pressure of her body next to him, and slipped a sleep-heavy arm around her. She petted him hopefully but got no response beyond a faint sigh. Indeed tired, she thought. He may wish to mate when he awakens, but not now. Pity I'm not his favorite: I think he'd rouse for that.... Was he married, in his own universe? To whom? That handsome black woman? Unlikely. She keeps her own room, far from his. He went there last night as if he were courting, and she sent him away again. Not her.... Was it one of those men who died in the Great Change? That would explain much of his grief.... I must talk to Jenneth. That decided, she slid one arm over Kirk's back and dropped into sleep beside him.

Captain's Log, Stardate 6060.3/

THIS IS THE BIG DAY. THE SUNFIRE'S CREW IS ABOARD, EXCEPT FOR QUANNECHOTA, WHO'S HERE WORKING THE COMPUTER. THEY'VE JUST CAST OFF THE MOORING LINE. IF ONLY THE ENTERPRISE HAD ENOUGH POWER TO TOW THEM, THIS WOULD TAKE ONLY MINUTES. AS IT IS, THE SUNFIRE WILL HAVE TO GO ON ITS OWN POWER, AND THIS TRIP WILL TAKE HOURS. WE'LL PACE BESIDE HER, HELP MONITOR HER SYSTEMS WITH OUR SENSORS, AND PROBE FOR A SAFE LANDING SPOT, BUT THAT'S ABOUT ALL WE CAN AFFORD TO DO. FRUSTRATING! QUANNECHOTA IS WORKING BUSILY ON A POWER-RATIO CURVE THAT WILL TELL US HOW MUCH ENERGY WE CAN SAFELY EXPEND ON THE PROBES - AND EVERYTHING ELSE, FOR THAT MATTER. SHE'S LEARNED HOW TO HANDLE THE COMPUTER REMARKABLY WELL; IT'S AS IF SHE WERE BORN FOR THE JOB.

THE COMMUNICATIONS OFFICERS OF BOTH SHIPS ARE SOMEWHAT FATIGUED; THEY HAD TO MAKE SOME LAST-MINUTE ADJUSTMENTS ON THE SUITS' COMMUNICATIONS SYSTEMS, SINCE NOT ALL OF THE ANARCHISTS AGREED TO WEAR SPACE-ARMOR FROM OUR STORES. THEY SAID THEY PREFERRED TO STICK TO THE DEVIL THEY KNEW: UHURA DIDN'T SAY MUCH THAT WAS COMPLIMENTARY ABOUT THAT.

THE SUNFIRE IS GOING INTO SYSTEM-BY-SYSTEM COUNTDOWN. THEY'LL BE STARTING ANY MOMENT. KIRK OUT.

The main screen focused on Jenneth Roantree, strapped into the pilot's seat in her borrowed suit. Green light from the chemical lamps and blue light from her monitor screens played eerily across her intent face as she studied her board, sharpening the planes of bone and muscle, making her look hard and grim and efficient. Kirk noticed that in that light and in that bulky suit she didn't look like a woman at all - just an anonymous spaceship captain. For some reason the thought bothered him.

"Number 51, report!" Roantree called out, loud enough to carry directly through the long cabin's atmosphere.

"51: recycler working, monitor working, systems go!" a young girl's voice sang back.

"Number 50, report!" Roantree's voice slipped into a sing-song pattern as she bent over the bank of monitor screens.

"50: water-jacket working, monitor working, systems go!" Jean Battre-Le-Diable chanted back. Kirk briefly wondered why the Anarchists had put their chief biologist in charge of the ship's water-tanks, and whether all the crewmen had more than one job, and just how many skills and responsibilities each person had.

"Number 49, report!" Roantree sang on, as the Enterprise's crew watched and listened, fascinated. Kirk noted her voice sliding into a regular tune and rhythm, and remembered something he'd read long ago about the original function of sea-chanteys. He remembered seeing an ancient film that showed barefoot sailors hauling up the sails on an old-fashioned windjammer to the tune of "Haul Away, Joe." The effect of hearing and seeing the same thing on a spaceship was definitely weird. Space-chanteys, now? he wondered. Never on a real ship, of course. A doomed art, but interesting...interesting....

Screen by screen Roantree chanted her way through the ship's systems, finding them all clear. One by one she tested out the steering jets, making the little ship bob and weave like a clumsy dancer, and finally came to the main jet feed.

"Fuel feed open, L'Ox feed open, main valve open...." There was a brief breathless pause, and then light flared blue on the last monitor screen and the Anarchists were visibly pressed back in their seats. "Ignition! We have ignition! Main jet, go." Roantree's last words were drowned in cheers from her crew that were echoed in sighs of relief on the Enterprise's bridge. The screen shifted to a view of the Sunfire sailing through space on her long plume of blue flame, emitting short puffs from her side-jets as she adjusted her course. As Kirk watched, the side-jets ceased and the length of the main jet's flame increased, and the little ship began to pick up speed.

"Under power all the way," Scott chuckled. "I never thought I'd sit here on a starship and be a mother-hen anxious over a torch-powered antique! Aye, but she'll do. She'll do...."

"Sulu, keep pace with them," Kirk ordered. "Quanna, what's her estimated time of arrival?"

"Approximately 0715 hours, if nothing untoward occurs."

"Plenty of time. Uhura, give me that interior view again."

Uhura wordlessly complied. The screen flicked to an image of Roantree, leaning back in her leather-webbed seat, gazing contentedly at the screen and doing nothing else whatsoever. Behind her Kirk could see a few of the other Anarchists moving through the web of braces toward the hatchway, but most of them sat idly in their seats. Many of them were even asleep. Worried, Kirk put through a call.

"Jenneth," he said. "Do you realize that half of your crew's asleep? Is there something wrong with the atmosphere in there?"

Roantree blinked, glanced at her board, and shook her head. "No, the air's fine. Don't worry. Nobody's asleep but the 2nd and 3rd shifts. No point keeping them awake all day and night."

"Oh," Kirk took that in. "Is there any reason why they can't just go to their cabins?"

"What cabins?" Roantree frowned slightly. "This is it."

Kirk gulped, thinking of that whole crew sitting packed in that one chamber, strapped to their seats, for the whole long ride. Primitive isn't the word for it! he thought. Our shuttlecraft are better equipped than that.... But this is what our ancestors endured.... "'Pioneers! Oh, Pioneers!'" he quoted.

Roantree laughed, tossed him a vague salute, leaned back in her webbing and promptly fell asleep.

Sleeping in the hurricane's eye, Kirk thought as he watched the viewscreen sweep over the Sunfire's packed interior. Anything she can do, I can do.

When the bridge crew went off duty, Kirk took the first watch. He also took the second. When Quannachota came up to take her turn in the late hours of the ship's night, he was still there. When the bridge crew returned in the early morning they found Quannechota silently monitoring the screens and the computer, and Kirk asleep in the chair. Scott gently shook him awake, and they proceeded to their work with no comment whatsoever.

Project Tape R-73, Roantree recording.

LANDFALL IN HALF AN HOUR. WE'RE COMING OVER CLAVIUS RIGHT NOW. KIRK REPORTS ICE DEPOSITS IN THE CRATER, ALL LEVELS, AS WE FEARED. SOME TROUBLE FINDING A SPOT WHERE THE ICE IS DEEP ENOUGH THAT THE HEAT OF OUR LANDING WON'T TOUCH IT. DON'T DARE SET DOWN TOO FAR FROM THE CRYSTAL DEPOSITS. IN THE END, I GUESS, WE'LL JUST HAVE TO CROSS OUR FINGERS AND HOPE. GRAVITY PULLING STRONGLY NOW. MUST SET THE GYRO-COMPASS. ROANTREE OUT.

On the Enterprise, all eyes fixed on the viewscreens, watching the Sunfire slowly lift her nose upright and pause in the unfiltered sunlight, casting a sharp black shadow on the pale dust of the Clavius crater floor. Everyone knew how treacherous that powdered surface was. Sensor probes had shown ice deposits in the rock beneath, but below the Sunfire at least the nearest ice was more than 100 meters down. The heat from her main jet shouldn't touch it, Kirk thought, nervously rubbing his chin. How is Jenneth doing? "Uhura, give me an interior view of the ship."

The screen obligingly darkened to an image of Jenneth Roantree, her helmet sealed on tight and green and blue light flickering across it. Her gloved hands moved in slow and infinitely careful degrees on the large dials, and her face was wide-eyed and intent on an antique gyro-compass that spun shakily in its niche on the console.

"No helm computer, nothing...." Sulu breathed in admiration. "She's doing it all by eye."

"Yes," Kirk admitted. "That's almost a lost skill in our time-line." And you'd never call yourself a Captain, Jenneth - just a skilled pilot and chanteyman.... I can't sing and I don't know if I could pilot like that.... "Resume original view, Uhura, and tie in audio."

Again the screen showed the Sunfire poised above the crater, but now its main jet flame was a little shorter, its shadow a little wider, its height above the dust a little less. The sound that accompanied the picture was an orderly web of voices, intense but steady.

"Height 3000, speed 110 - slow it, Jen." Sparks' voice.

"Slowing," said Roantree. The Sunfire's jet-flame lengthened.

"95....80....65....good, good. Height 2000."

"Tilt, 2 degrees at 165," Bailey's voice warned.

"Correcting," said Roantree. A puff of silver mist jetted from the Sunfire's side and gleamed in the sharp sunlight.

"Yes, she's coming up...good...good...."

"Height 1500, speed 50....45....good," Sparks added.

"Tilt overcorrecting," muttered Bailey. "2 degrees, 3...."

"Height 1000, speed 40."

"Tilt, 5 degrees at 15! Jenneth, what's wrong?"

"Goddammit, the #8 valve!" Roantree snapped. "It's frozen!"

"Height 650, speed 35." Sparks' voice never wavered.

"Fire #1 and #7!" Bailey urged.

"I'm trying," Roantree muttered, obviously through clenched teeth.

The two side-jets fired faint clouds from the shadowed side of the Sunfire's hull, clouds that thinned quickly and stopped.

"Not enough, Jen. The tilt's stopped, but not corrected. Fire again!"

"Nom d'un dieu d'un chien plein de merde!" Roantree bellowed. "Now #1 and #7 are freezing up! Maybe #2 and #6...."

"Height 350, speed 20," Sparks intoned.

The Enterprise crew froze in their seats, watching, praying and swearing in assorted languages. "Helm," Kirk snapped. "Position us directly over that ship. Stand by with tractor beams. Transporter room, stand by." Let's hope they don't need it! The power outlay - break down the rest of the crystals...."

The Sunfire's side steering-jets fired, blasting bright mist across the edge of the shadow on the ship's hull. The visible tilt didn't change. The ship leaned like the legendary Tower of Pisa as she sank down towards the moon's surface, and the blue flame of her main jet already stirring and darkening the gray lunar dust.

"Speed 15, height 200....175...." Sparks' voice began to shake.

"Not correcting," Roantree whispered. "What the hell's wrong with #1 and #7?" She must have fired the two inner jets again, for a slight puff of snowflakes dusted from the valves, glittering briefly as they emerged from the Sunfire's shadow.

"C'est l'ombre!" cried Quannechota, jerking upright. "The shadow! Jenneth - put me through to her!"

Surprised, Uhura did so. Before Quannechota could speak, Kirk realized what she meant and yelled to the Sunfire. "Jenneth, turn the ship! Spin it! Roll it! Turn it so that #1, #7, and #8 are facing the sun! The valves have frozen because they're in your own shadow!"

"Son of a bitch!" said Roantree, enlightened.

As the Enterprise crew held its collective breath, the flame of the Sunfire's main jet lengthened. It splayed out over the writhing moon-dust like an opening flower, and the ship's descent stopped. For seconds that seemed to last forever, the Sunfire stood motionless on its column of flame. Then more white mist puffed from the angled steering jets and the ship slowly began to turn, rotating like a dream-slow wheel on an axle of fire, somehow keeping its precarious balance, until the frozen jets moved into the sunlight.

"Firing #2," said Roantree.

Mist streamed from the newly-darkened jet, and the Sunfire slowly lost its tilt. The Enterprise crew dared to breathe again. The flame of the main jet diminished, and the uprightheaded Sunfire resumed her slow descent.

"Speed 5 and holding," Sparks' voice was back to its original calm tone. "Height 100....75....50...."

The Sunfire inched down the last few feet, her landing-struts pressing into the scorched lunar rock as delicately as a lover's touch. When the engine stopped and the blue flame dissipated, it came almost as a shock to realize that the landing was finished. There was an instant's silence, then everybody cheered.

"Lord, Lord, I've never sweated so much over a single landing," Scott laughed, wiping tears out of his eyes. "And, oh, please, never again!"

"I've never seen piloting like that!" Sulu gasped, clutching his board as if he needed its support. "And all by eye!"

Safe, Kirk thought, suddenly too exhausted to move. Down safe. He watched, almost jellied with relief, as the Anarchists emerged from the Sunfire and began unloading the precious mining equipment from the ship's midriff. He could barely raise a chuckle - while everybody else guffawed - when the Anarchists discovered that the ground beneath the ship was still so hot that it could sting their feet right through their boots, and began hopping from foot to foot in an effort to cool off their boot-soles.

Chekov was in the middle of the comment about the Russian origin of that particular dance-step when the situation suddenly ceased to be funny. With a grinding lurch that could be heard over the intercom, one of the Sunfire's landing-struts sank a foot deep into the crumbling rock. A load of the construction material, hanging halfway down from the loading hatch, swung against the ship's hull with a bell-like clang.

"What the hell?" Roantree's voice came over the confused cries of the rest of the crew. "We're settling!"

"Nom d'un nom - It's the ice-pocket," Quannechota replied from her crouch over the scanner readouts. "The prolonged heat of the landing went through the rock, reached the ice below, melted it. You're standing on an underground lake, and the surface rock is sinking into it."

"Oh no!" Kirk sat bolt upright. "Helm, get a tractor beam on the nose of that ship! Hold her up!"

"The power expenditure will be...." Quannechota started to say.

"Everybody off!" Roantree bellowed. "Emergency evacuation! Get out of here, team. Move!"

Hatches popped open all over the little ship, and suited Anarchists boiled out of them. Some crewmen scampered down ladders, some slid down cables, and a few - escaping from the lower hatches - jumped all the way to the ground. A second ragged grinding went through the ship and the landing-strut sank deeper. More crewmen - some of them from the upper hatches - jumped to the ground. Not all of them landed well.

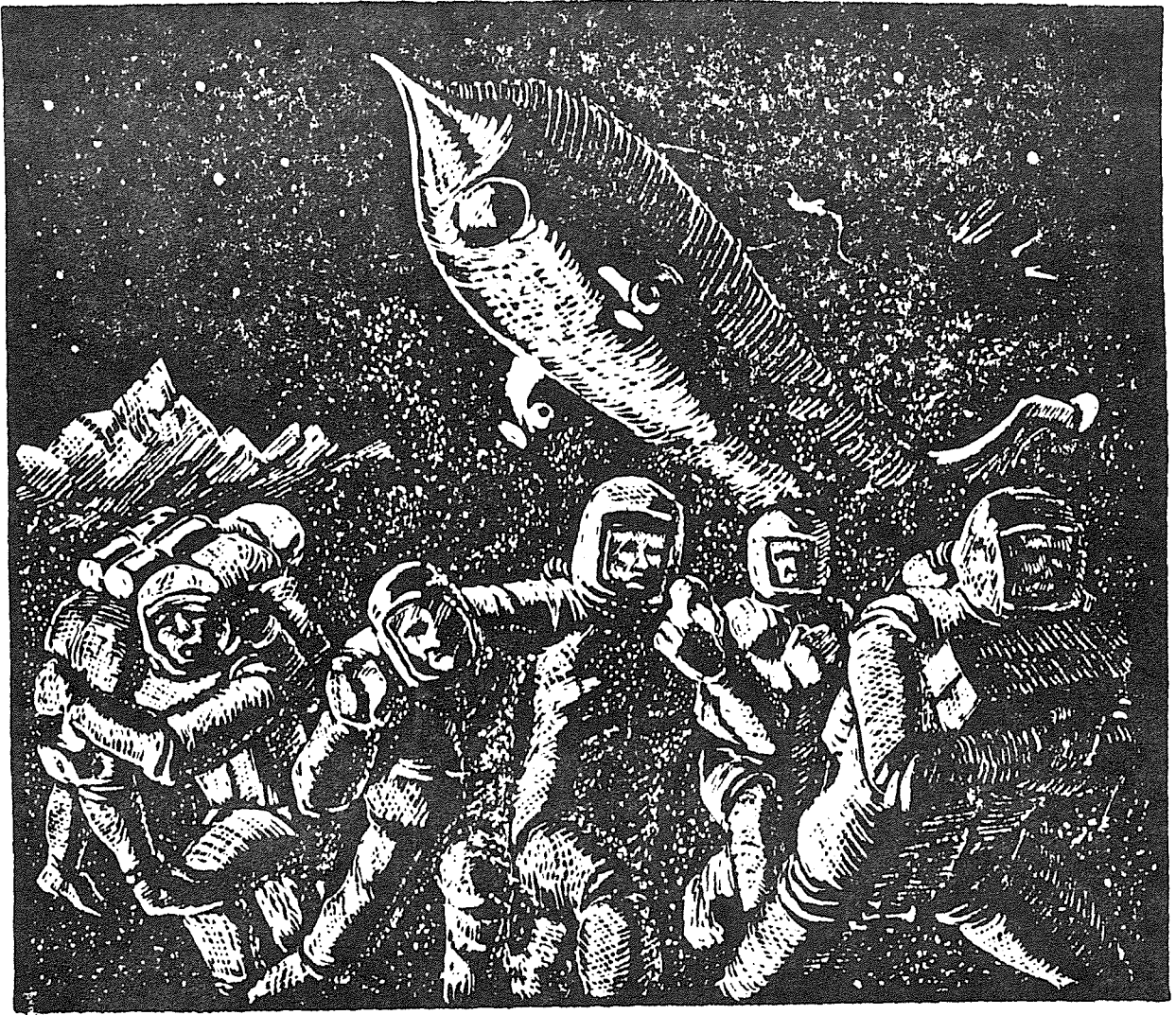
"Tractor beam on, Sir," Sulu reported as the odd light caught the Sunfire's nose. "How long can we keep holding her?"

"Approximately 3½ minutes before the strain reduces the remaining dilithium crystals by 50%," said Quannechota.

"Is everybody out?" Roantree's voice rang through the sagging ship. "Everybody clear?"

"Almost," Kirk answered her, although he could see her crewmen still scrambling out through the hatches, sliding or leaping to the ground, dragging themselves and each other away from the leaning ship and the treacherous ground. "Almost all clear. Get out of there, Jenneth! We can't hold you much longer!"

"Just a minute." Behind her voice came a rusty creaking from unwilling levers. Kirk was about to ask her what the hell she was doing when the screen showed him. From the Sunfire's main jet poured a flood of colorless fluid that boiled and steamed away as it hit the heated ground. For a moment Kirk wondered if she was trying to lift off; then he realized that there was no flame from the jet. She's jettisoning the alcohol. Why?



"Two minutes," said Quannechota. "Crystal deterioration increasing."

"Jenneth!" Kirk yelled. "We can't hold you any more! Get out of there - now!"

"Coming!" Roantree shouted back. There was a muffled clanging of boots on metal, and then Kirk saw her appear in the open hatch at the top of the ship, grab one of the trailing cables and begin sliding down it. She was halfway to the ground when the Sunfire lurched again, throwing extra strain on the Enterprise's tractor beam, and throwing Roantree against the hanging pile of construction material. Her escape line was hopelessly fouled with the landing cable.

"One and a half minutes," said Quannechota.

"I'll never make it in time," Roantree called. "Cut the ship loose. I'll jump the rest of the way."

"No!" Kirk shouted, knowing she'd never survive a jump from that height. "Stay where you are! Transporter, fix on that woman and beam her up. Helm, disengage tractor beam."

The pale light of the tractor beam vanished. The Sunfire slowly and majestically began to heel over, with Jenneth Roantree riding it down. The ship's nose was less than 10 meters away from the ground when the transporter-sparkle blossomed among the tangled cables. Roantree disappeared, leaving the Sunfire to fall alone. The ship hit the ground, throwing up geysers of dust, and bounced slightly, and broke apart in the middle. A chorus of short, hard screams revealed that not all of Roantree's crew had gotten out of range in time. Kirk crushed cold sweat out of his eyes and wondered how many of them had been caught under the falling ship.

"I'll be in the transporter room," he said, getting up. "Mr. Scott, you have the con." He saw Quannechota start to follow him, then glance at her board and sit back down again and start working the computer. As he step-

ped into the turbolift Kirk heard her ask Uhura for help in getting exact sensor readings on the number of bodies, and he was grateful that the doors closed before he could hear any more.

In the transporter room, Lt. Kyle had a panel open and was probing in the transporter's innards, muttering to himself. He started up guiltily, as Kirk came in. "Sorry about the delay, Sir," he apologized nervously. "The focus was a bit off, and it took a minute to aim it right."

Kirk waved him back to work and went to Roantree, who was sitting on the edge of the transporter platform, holding her helmet in her hands and looking as if she was about to be sick in it. Kirk sat down beside her, pushing away a guilty sense of satisfaction that she could be scared, too. "Jenneth, are you all right?" he asked.

"I...think so." She turned the helmet in her hands. "How's the ship? How bad?"

"Broken. I'm sorry."

"Did the oxygen tank burst? Or the water tank?"

"No, they seemed to be intact. Why did you jettison the alcohol?"

"To prevent an explosion if the oxygen got loose. Don't worry, we've got more fuel for the mining equipment; it was sealed in special tanks. We'll get you the crystals all right." She turned to look at him. "Brother Jim, while I was falling I saw.... There were some of my people beneath the ship, right where she was coming down. They couldn't get away in time. How many...?"

"I don't know. Quanna's checking it. Now many, though; most of them got away safely."

"...and I've lost my ship...." She sighed and straightened up. "How long will it take your friend to fix the transporter? I've got to get back down and help them set up the shelters."

Kirk threw a questioning glance at Kyle, who understood perfectly. "Just another minute, Sir. In fact... there. You can use it now."

"Fine," said Roantree, getting up and putting on her helmet. "Jim, can you keep a radio channel open without using too much power? We may need some help."

"Of course. Good luck, Jen."

He watched as the transporter beamed her away, wishing he could have thought of something better to say to her, knowing very well how she must feel about losing her crewmen, to say nothing of her ship.

Bad Moon Rising

Project Tape R-76, Roantree recording.

GOD, WHAT A MESS. THE SUNFIRE'S BACK IS BROKEN, AND SHE'LL NEVER FLY AGAIN. SOME CARGO LOSSES, MOSTLY CONSTRUCTION MATERIAL WHICH WE CAN REPLACE BY CANNIBALIZING THE SHIP. ONE DIGGIN'-CAT CRUSHED BEYOND REPAIR, BUT THE OTHER THREE OKAY. HYDROPONICS SET SHAKEN UP, BUT JEAN BATTRE-LE-DIABLE SAYS IT'S OPERABLE. CREW LOSSES BAD: 6 KILLED OUTRIGHT, 4 OTHERS INJURED SERIOUSLY BUT RECOVERABLE, AND COUNTLESS CUTS AND BRUISES. DIGGING OPERATIONS WILL BE DELAYED AT LEAST 3 DAYS WHILE WE SET UP BASE CAMP, DUE TO CREW AND EQUIPMENT LOSSES. JEAN BATTRE-LE-DIABLE CAN'T HELP MUCH WITH MEDICAL WORK EITHER; HE'S IMMOBILIZED WITH A BROKEN LEG. DAMN! DAMN! DAMN!

HELL, IT COULD BE WORSE. WE HAVE WATER AND AIR, HYDROPONICS AND FOOD STOCKS, FUEL AND EQUIPMENT, AND MOST OF THE EMERGENCY SHELTERS ARE SET UP. WE'LL MAKE IT. IN A PINCH WE CAN GET HELP FROM THE ENTERPRISE, ALTHOUGH QUANNA SAYS ITS POWER IS DOWN TO 49%. THEY'LL HAVE TO HOARD POWER, BUT THEY CAN SURVIVE WITHOUT TOO MUCH TROUBLE. MORALE'S SURPRISINGLY HIGH, ALL THINGS CONSIDERED. PEOPLE EVEN HAD TIME TO GET INTO AN ARGUMENT OVER WHAT TO NAME THE BASE-CAMP. SPARKS, IN A MOMENT OF RARE STUPIDITY, SUGGESTED 'BASE ALPHA' - THE ORIGINAL NAME OF TYCHO BASE. TALK ABOUT ILL-OMENED NAMES.... WE FINALLY AGREED ON 'CAMP CLAVIUS', WHICH IS SIMPLE, BUT APT.

TOMORROW I HAVE TO GO OVER THE FOOD STORES, HELP SET UP THE RECYCLING UNITS, HOLD THE FUNERAL SERVICE, AND PROBABLY SING THE DEATH-SONGS FOR JACK REINHART AND JOE...NOT LOOKING FORWARD TO THAT. IT'S SO CRAMPED IN THIS SHELTER I HARDLY HAVE ROOM TO LIE DOWN, BUT THAT'S ALL RIGHT; I COULD SLEEP IN A BED OF NAILS RIGHT NOW. LORD OF LIGHT, BUT I'M TIRED. TOMORROW...TOMORROW....

Kirk sat on the darkened bridge, staring unseeingly at the blank viewscreen, listening to Roantree read off the provisions list to Quanna.

"...1500 pounds of freeze-dried meat, 1450 pounds of freeze-dried fruits and vegetables, 500 pounds of sugar, 450 pounds of beef pemmican, 300 pounds of bacon, 250 pounds of dried fish, 100 pounds of salt, and 97 pounds of Granola."

"What's Granola?" Kirk asked.

"Horse feed," said Quannechota, wrinkling her lip. "Unfit for human consumption."

"You know, Quanna, that's the first time I've ever heard you make a joke." He stood up, stretched, and came over to lean on the railing behind her. "I didn't think you could do it."

"I am Chippewa." She shrugged. "The Chippewa are not noted for their sense of humor."

"That's it for the stores," Roantree's voice continued. "I have to read services for the funeral in ten minutes. Roantree out."

Kirk glanced at the communications console, where Uhura was quietly working the board. She noticed his look and nodded back, courteously, her expression neither friendly or unfriendly, only calm and professional. He turned away with a sigh and went back to Quannechota.

"Are all Chippewa like you?" he asked idly, "I mean, terribly calm and dignified and...well, unexpressive?"

"Like a Wooden Indian, you mean?" She smiled, ever so slightly. "That is the common term. 'Stoic' is another. Many Indian tribes are like that. It is part of our custom, and has been so for centuries. Originally it was a method of defense against our traditional enemies, since even in battle an enemy is more liable to respect a warrior who shows no fear and is shaken by nothing. In time, we learned that it was also a useful defense against other calamities. Therefore, we hold this Stoical calm and presence of mind to be a great virtue, and train our children to it from the cradle. It is all very sensible, once one understands."

"Uh, yes, I see...." Kirk replied, considering all that. He didn't turn to look at Uhura again, so he didn't notice that for an instant her face was very expressive indeed. "Well, about this upcoming funeral service...Is it permitted to, er, observe? And can we spare the power for the viewscreen?" It's the least we can do for those people who died trying to get the crystals for us....

"Yes," Quannechota replied, studying the readout on her board. "We may attend from here. The energy output will be negligible; such services do not last long."

"Lieutenant, please find the funeral." Kirk signaled vaguely to Uhura, glancing at her no more than was necessary. He didn't notice how Quannechota's eyebrow went up at the word 'lieutenant', either.

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The screen brightened, blurred, and cleared on a scene inside one of the Anarchists' moon-shelters, this one a small geodesic dome made almost entirely of filtered glass triangles sealed to thin metal braces. Inside the dome, laid in a row of slight hollows dug in the bare stone, although they'd been laid out with obvious care, the remains looked ugly. Most of them were considerably crushed, and some showed unmistakable signs of explosive decompression. Before them stood Roantree and a handful of her section chiefs. The rest of the Anarchists waited outside the dome. Roantree cleared her throat, chanted something in what sounded like Latin, and then read off the names of the dead. Kirk caught one name that he recognized - Memory Joe - but couldn't identify the face among the dead. So much for the boy with the eidetic memory, he thought. With him go most of their records. Good thing they have Quanna up here to work the computer....

Roantree finished the list of names, took out an old-fashioned bound book, opened to a place-marked page, and began to read.

And Death shall have no dominion.
Dead men, naked, they shall be one
With the man in the wind and the west moon;
And Death shall have no dominion.

Kirk straightened up as he recognized the poem. Yes, it was a fitting thing to read for a funeral on the moon, or anywhere, for that matter.

When their bones are picked clean and the clean bones gone,
They shall have stars at elbow and foot;
Though lovers be lost love shall not;
And Death shall have no dominion.

From somewhere on the Enterprise came the sound of weeping, in a woman's voice. For a moment Kirk thought it was Uhura, but when he looked he saw that her face was sealed and her eyes were dry. He realized that the sound was coming over the intercom, and wondered why she had left it open. So the rest of the crew could observe? But why should they want to? These people don't mean as much to them as they do to me...And who is she, that's so affected? As he listened, he suddenly recognized the voice. It was Christine Chapel's. That answered the questions; he knew why she had wanted to observe, and whom she was crying for. He felt tears stinging his eyes, and quickly wiped them away before anyone could see. Nobody saw, he thought. Maybe nobody would care. It's legitimate to cry at funerals.

Roantree finished the poem and closed the book. Sparks stepped toward her, holding out an open box full of a coarse brown powder. Roantree took a handful of it and scattered it over the bodies, chanting somberly.

Cold moon, life hath touched thee, and thou art no longer virgin.
 Thou art no longer virgin, for lovers have come to thee.
 Lovers have come to thee, and in the ancient fashion thou hast taken them and slain them.
 Thou hast slain them, and here they lie awaiting rebirth.
 They await rebirth, and their flesh is paid to thee.
 Paid to thee is the ancient price of life, which brings forth life.
 As life brings forth life, I conjure thee to life.
 I conjure thee to life, that thou shalt be fertile, and the mother of living things.
 Thou shalt be the mother of living things, for life hath touched thee, virgin no more.

With that she moved back and motioned to the others, who took up small shovels from a pile near the air-lock, and stepped forward. They planted thin metal markers in front of the graves and began shovelling the lunar dust over the bodies. Shallow graves, Kirk thought, trying to ignore the cold ripples running up and down his spine. What was that brown powder? What did it signify? And why are they buried in an air-filled dome instead of outside?



He watched as the Anarchists piling dust on the bodies, then planted what looked like seeds in the dust, and poured carefully-measured cupfuls of water on the seeds. He began to get an idea of what they were trying to do. He waited until the funeral party had filed out of the dome before he called Roantree on a closed signal. "Jenneth," he asked, "What was that brown powder you scattered over the bodies? What was it supposed to do?"

"It's a kind of soil-building fungus," she answered. "Given a little organic material and oxygen and water, it can break down rock and make fertile topsoil of it."

"I see. And the seeds?"

"Mixed plants, various species that can thrive on poor soil and make breathable atmosphere. They're the kind we use in the hydroponics tanks. The glass dome can be used as a greenhouse. You understand?"

"I think so. Given enough time and enough...generations...you could make the whole moon like Earth, couldn't you?"

"It's our way," said Roantree. "Our people may have died, but by the Mother, we'll gain something for them."

Kirk ended the transmission and sat back to think about that. In his own timeline the moon had indeed been given topsoil and plant life and an Earth-like atmosphere, although not by methods as grim as this. Still, he thought, there's a comforting sort of logic behind it, compelling life out of death itself....

"'Prendre la vie de la morte,'" Quannechota echoed his thought.

"True, and sensible," Kirk agreed, noticing that the faint sound of weeping had stopped. He settled back in the command chair, letting his eyes rest on the now-blank screen and his thoughts turn inward.

Behind him, Uhura turned back to her board and wondered in passing where Kirk had learned to understand Quebecois-French.

Captain's Log, Stardate 6065.9.

M'BENGA JUST CAME TO ME WITH A REQUEST FROM THE MEDICAL STAFF TO TAKE DOWN A TEAM IN ONE OF THE SHUTTLECRAFT. QUANNA DID SOME CALCULATING AND AGREED THAT THEY COULD MAKE TWO TRIPS - ONE TO TAKE DOWN THE TEAM AND ANOTHER TO BRING THEM SUPPLIES. WHEN I SIGNED THE ORDER I NOTICED THAT THE FIRST NAME ON THE VOLUNTEER LIST WAS CHRISTINE CHAPEL'S. I CAN UNDERSTAND WHY SHE WANTS TO GO, BUT I WISH SHE'D BE WILLING TO TALK TO ME....

THE REST OF THE CREW IS TENSE AND SUBDUED. WE'VE HAD TO CUT POWER OUTLAY IN SO MANY WAYS, EVEN RESTRICT THE USE OF THE COMPUTER, THAT THERE ISN'T MUCH FOR THEM TO DO EXCEPT HELP SCOTTY NURSE THE ENGINES OR TRY TO THINK OF WAYS TO HELP THE ANARCHISTS. SO FAR I'VE GOTTEN ABOUT 20 HOPEFULLY-HELPFUL SUGGESTIONS. I GAVE THEM ALL TO QUANNECHOTA, WHO LOOKED THEM OVER AND RELAYED SOME OF THEM DOWN TO CAMP CLAVIUS. I'M GLAD SOME OF THE IDEAS WERE USEFUL; IT'S AWFUL TO BE SO HELPLESS UP HERE WHILE JENNETH'S PEOPLE DO ALL THE WORK, AND SUFFERING, FOR US.... JUST WATCHING THEM THESE PAST FEW DAYS HAS BEEN NERVE-WRACKING. I'VE DONE NOTHING BUT SIT ON THE BRIDGE LISTENING TO REPORTS ALL DAY, AND I'M AS EXHAUSTED AS JENNETH. I THINK I COULD SLEEP FOR A WEEK.

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Quannechota roused slowly from deep sleep, wondering what had wakened her. Was it a sound? A motion? Yes, both. There is was again. She turned carefully toward Kirk, noting that he had thrown off his covers and was tossing and moaning in his sleep. Another nightmare, she guessed. Worse than last night. Should I wake him or let it play out? Wait and observe. It may fade soon.

The nightmare didn't fade; it grew worse. Kirk twitched and struggled vaguely, tossing his head back and forth on the pillow, as if trying to deny something with all of his mind and body. Quannechota pressed her arm across his chest to reassure and restrain him, but he didn't seem to notice. His breathing grew faster, came in muffled cries - incoherent sounds of terror and pain and denial. He thrashed and fought against her hands, trying to break free of her grip and throw himself forward. Quannechota took him by the shoulders and shook him, hoping to waken him without too much shock, but her touch seemed to trigger some internal explosion. His body arched upward like a drawn bow, hands reaching out to claw blindly at the air, and his voice burst loose in a wild blank scream that broke in the middle.

No time for half-measures, Quannechota decided. She took a handful of his hair and pulled it hard. Kirk gasped and struggled and opened his eyes. He seemed disoriented at first, and Quannechota tugged his hair again and made him look at her.



"Spock?" he panted. "No...Quanna. A dream. Nightmare. I thought I was done with them.... Oh God, I hope that never happens again!" He dug his hands into the blankets and stared up at the ceiling, still breathing raggedly, his eyes wide pools of horror.

Quannechota got up, padded into the bathroom, and came back with a towel and a wet cloth. She sat down beside him and began washing the cold sweat off his face and body, using slow gentling strokes, waiting for the tension to drain from him. At length the trembling faded, and she ventured to ask: "What did you dream?"

"Nothing prophetic," he answered. "Terrors out of the past. I was back in Chicago, 1990, back on the ship, watching the flood roll over the city, watching it kill my friends.... But this time I knew what was happening, knew that time was changing, and it was my fault...my fault...I saw...On the screen, I saw Spock coming up through the water, trying to swim, reaching up to me for help, calling my name...I knew that if I could save him I could stop the disaster, keep time from changing, but I couldn't reach him. I tried and tried, but I couldn't...reach...And he sank, went down, drowned in that black water, and I watched him die...."

Kirk turned his head and pressed his forearm over his eyes. Quannechota went on with the steady washing, keeping the strokes long and deep and comforting. "Who was Spock?" she asked.

"My friend," Kirk whispered. "Best friend a man ever had. Also my Science Officer. He'd saved my life and my ship and my sanity more times than I can count, but I couldn't save him.... He was an alien, a Vulcan. You must have seen him on the tapes; he's the one with the pointed ears and the long, straight eyebrows... smooth black hair, dark eyes, tall, thin...faintly green-colored, like new leaves...his blood was green. He looked elongated and fragile, but he was incredibly strong...like all Vulcans, devoted to logic. He pretended that he didn't have emotions, didn't want to have any, but we all knew better. He was the kindest, bravest man I ever knew...and I miss him. I miss him very much...."

"I see," said Quannechota, the steady motion of her hands never changing. 'Friend', you say? Surely more than that! You mourn him - and describe him - as if he were a lover. Strange marriage customs...and

you are strangely shy, and somewhat prudish. So this one was your lover, but you refrain from saying so because you were not formally married?...Ah, that would explain much. "Je pleut de ta tristesse," she said. "I weep for your sorrow." I know what it is to lose someone that one loves." Her hands moved up to his shoulders and clung there for a moment.

"Yes...." Kirk took a deep breath and let it out in a long sigh. "Yes, that's the right word, though I couldn't have said it before...no more than he could have said it to me. His culture repressed the expression of all emotions, mine only some of them, but the end result was the same...."

He pulled his arm away from his eyes and looked up at Quannechota, wondering why he found it easy to talk to her like this, and why her cool touch and calm silences were so comforting. "All those years that we worked and fought and explored and risked our necks together, there was a bond between us that we couldn't ever...bring to words...I don't know if words would have done any good, but I wish I'd said them. I wish I'd had the courage...or the sense...But it's too late now."

The months-long pain surged up like a wave, burning his eyes. He started to raise his hand, but Quannechota was there before him, brushing the escaping tears away. Gratefully he caught her hand and held it - and then, all in a rush, he took her by the arms and pulled her down beside him. Quannechota continued to stroke him gently, although his lovemaking was rough and hurried and more than a little frantic. She knew very well that he was using the pleasure only to drown the pain.

I shall not be annoyed, she thought, ^{even} even though this is not the best class of mating I have had from you, even though you would not roll with me for days and take me now only because you are suffering. That is, after all, no more than I expected when I first came to you...and even this is not bad...not bad at all....

Afterwards, when he fell asleep across her, she didn't push him off. She ran her fingers idly over his back, making him stretch and sigh in his sleep, and considered that he was actually quite good for someone who was still in mourning for a dead lover. Her last thought before sleep was to wonder drowsily what it was like to mate with an alien.

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Project Tape R-81, Roantree recording.

IT'S GOING BETTER THAN I'D HOPED. THE SHELTER COMPLEX IS TIGHT, HYDRO-TANKS BEGINNING TO SPROUT PLANTS, AND THE DIGGING-CATS CHECK OUT OKAY. WE'VE EVEN GOT THE WASHTUB READY, THANK MATERRA. I'VE NEVER WANTED A BATH SO MUCH IN MY LIFE! LESS THAN A WEEK, AND I'M ALREADY SICK TO DEATH OF MOON-DUST IN MY FOOD AND WATER AND CLOTHES AND HAIR AND SPACESUIT - EVEN IN MY SLEEPING-BAG, WHICH IS PROBABLY WHY I'VE BEEN HAVING BAD DREAMS ...AMONG OTHER REASONS. SPARKS NEVER FAILS TO TRACK IN ANOTHER CUPFUL OF THE DAMNED DUST EVERY TIME HE COMES THROUGH THE AIRLOCK. I'M TEMPTED TO POST "WIPE YOUR FEET" SIGNS.

MORE GOOD NEWS; THE ENTERPRISE IS SENDING DOWN A MEDICAL TEAM VIA THE SHUTTLECRAFT, WITH THEIR OWN EQUIPMENT AND SUPPLIES AND SHELTER SETUP. THAT MEANS THEY'LL HAVE ONE OF THOSE INCREDIBLE HEALING-RAY MACHINES, WHICH MEANS THAT THE INJURED WILL BE BACK ON THEIR FEET SOON, AND WE'LL HAVE TWO FULL SHIFTS TO DO THE DIGGING. CAN'T WAIT!

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Commander Scott circled the Galileo twice around Camp Clavius, taking a good look at it. The buildings were arranged like a knobbed wheel; a ring of connected geodesic domes with smaller domes attached, made of triangular panels of metal and glass, held together with metal braces and quick-drying glue.

"Aye," he murmured, "It'd work. The glass for greenhouse-effect heating and the metal for support.... But, Lord, how fragile! They could do wi' some more emergency shelters from oor stores."

"We'll set up the medical shelter in the middle of the ring," said Nurse Chapel. It was the first thing she'd said on the voyage. "We'll connect it to each of the main domes and as many of the secondary domes as we can manage."

"Aye, if they'll agree," Scott replied noncommittally. Nurse Chapel hadn't been the same since the Change; she was all business now, and nothing else. It was as if she'd given up on the very idea of having a personal life. Understandable reaction, I suppose, Scott thought. But she can't keep it up forever. When will the lass come out of it? Was that a wee bit more expression I heard in her voice? Hard to tell.... He turned his attention back to the controls, and brought the Galileo in for a neat landing in front of the powerhouse-dome.

Bailey and Roantree came running toward him, soaring over the ground in the long, leaping strides possible only in low gravity, and their welcome was a warm one. While the medical team unloaded themselves and their gear with a quick, dry efficiency, Scott toured the ring of main domes, chatting with Ann Bailey and marveling at the Anarchists' ingenuity. Bailey, delighted at another chance to talk shop, explained how they had used the rock-wool packing to cushion the glass construction panels during flight and to insulate the domes afterward, and how they used sunlight to heat the domes during the moon's long day and to charge solar batteries for power that would tide them through the coming two-week night. She started to explain how they were using parts from the wrecked Sunfire, but then noticed Roantree's grim look and quickly changed the subject to details of the mining operation.

"I've brought a wee gift thot may help ye there," Scott chuckled as they came back to the powerhouse-dome. He went out the airlock, rummaged around in the Galileo for a few minutes, and came back with two medium-sized crates. He opened them with a flourish, revealing 40 neatly-packed phasers and tricorders. "They're good for only 50 hours apiece," he apologized. "Wi' the ship sa short on power, we canna recharge 'em, but while they last they might be o' help."

"A help?! Oh, Lord of Light!" Bailey practically gibbered over the treasure. "Jen, with these we can reserve the digging-cats for cutting main galleries - we can cut three at once, on different levels - and use the 'corders to find to find good sub-tunnel sites, and dig 'em with these things, and...and...Damn! We can find your crystals in a couple of weeks!"

"Hallelujah!" Roantree exulted. She turned to Scott and put her hands on his shoulders. "Citizen Scott, I don't know how to thank you enough!" She smiled.

"Och, 'tis naethin'. I should ha' thought of it before...." Scott backed away from her, suddenly confused and almost frightened by how much her big hazel eyes and bright grin resembled Kirk's. He hadn't completely believed it before this. Just a moment earlier she had seemed a big, handsome woman; now she appeared as an eerie, alien, androgynous parody of the Captain. It upset Scott more than he could explain. "Weel, I've another trip ta make, and I'd better get on with it. See ye later, lass. Good luck." He turned away and scrambled out the airlock, and almost fled to the Galileo.

Bailey and Roantree watched him go, looked at each other, shrugged, and settled down to unloading the precious crates.

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Captain's Log, Stardate 6070.5.

THE ANARCHISTS ARE MAKING GOOD HEADWAY INTO THE MINING SITE. BAILEY REPORTS THAT THE MAIN SHAFTS HAVE GOTTEN NEARLY 1000 METERS INTO THE ROCK, AND THE TRICORDER READOUTS LOOK PROMISING. THEY'VE HIT SEVERAL ICE DEPOSITS, WHICH THEY'RE GRATEFUL ENOUGH TO FIND SINCE THEY CAN PUT THE WATER TO SO MANY USES, BUT CUTTING THROUGH THE ICE IS DANGEROUS AND TRICKY. IN THE MOON'S ALMOST NONEXISTENT ATMOSPHERE, WATER CAN BE EXPLOSIVE. THEY'VE HAD TWO CAVE-INS ALREADY.

IT'S FRUSTRATING AS HELL TO SIT UP HERE AND LISTEN TO THE PROGRESS REPORTS, AND NOT EVEN DARE TO TURN ON THE SCREEN AND LOOK. THE TYRANNY OF THAT DAMNED POWER-CONSUMPTION CURVE IS GETTING ON OUR NERVES. EVERYONE'S GETTING SHORT-TEMPERED AND TENSE EXCEPT THE ENGINEERS AND QUANNECHOTA. I'VE BEEN GETTING CONSTANT REQUESTS FROM CREWMEN WHO FEEL USELESS UP HERE AND WANT TO GO DOWN AND HELP THE ANARCHISTS. THAT WOULD BE AN IDEAL SOLUTION IF THEY COULD TAKE ADEQUATE SUPPLIES WITH THEM. QUANNECHOTA'S BECOME THE JUDGE OF WHO, HOW MANY, AND HOW MUCH CAN GO DOWN IN THE SHUTTLES, AND THE CREWMEN WHOM SHE'S HAD TO REFUSE TEND TO RESENT IT. I'VE

OVERHEARD A FEW GRUMBLES ABOUT THE ENTERPRISE HAVING A "COLD-BLOODED ALIEN SAVAGE FOR A SCIENCE OFFICER," AND IT WORRIES ME.

AT LEAST THERE'S NO RESENTMENT OF THE OTHER ANARCHISTS; THE CREW REGARDS THE GROUND PARTY WITH ADMIRATION AND FRANTIC INTEREST AND EVEN A SORT OF ENVY. I WONDER HOW MUCH OF THE ANARCHISTS' IDEAS AND CULTURE HAVE RUBBED OFF ON MY CREW, AND WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN WE GET BACK TO OUR OWN TIME-LINE...AND, DAMMIT, WE WILL GET BACK!

"It's a big deposit," a boyish voice ~~replied~~, "But it's way back. I don't know if the phaser will last."

"Take the 'cat," Bailey's voice cut in. "But take it slow; 15 degrees is a little steep for the treads."

"Slow is right," Roantree echoed. "All teams, attention all teams: bring 'corders and phasers to the end of Tunnel #3. Repeat...."

"Quannechota," Kirk asked, turning toward her station on the bridge, "can we afford to phaser out the rock for them?"

"I would not suggest it," Quannechota replied, studying her board. "This may be a false alarm. Best to wait until the 'cat reaches the site."

"How about a sensor-probe, or at least a look on the viewscreen?"

"A sensor-probe is unnecessary with the tricorders present. We can afford five minutes of viewscreen time in the next hour; it would be best to reserve those five minutes until the others reach the site, at the very least."

Unnoticed at the helm, ~~Sulu~~ turned and stared at her.

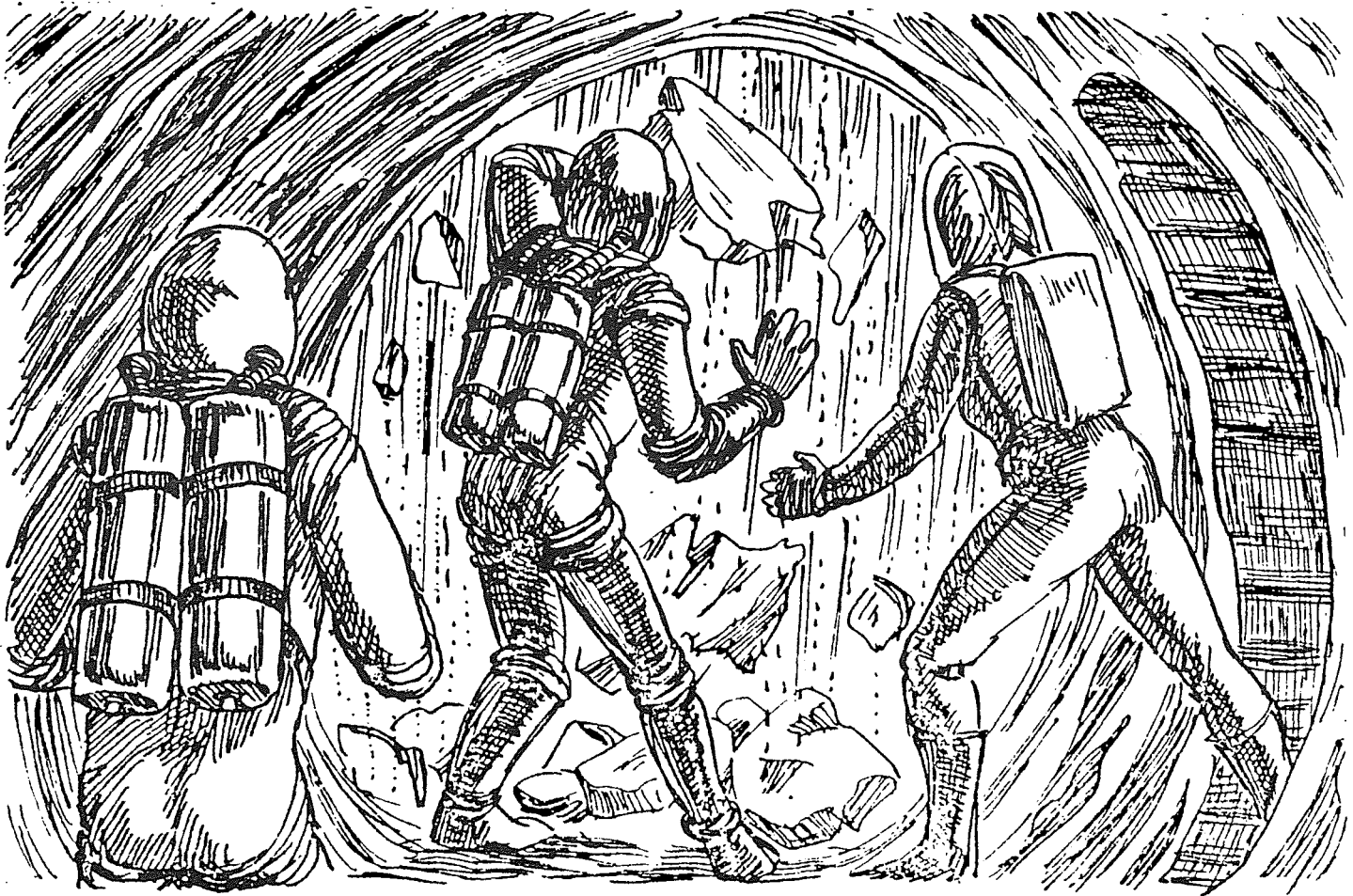
Kirk bit back an angry comment and glowered at his clenched fists. No point getting angry with her, he reminded himself. She's only doing the job she has to do. I might as well damn the cold equations of the energy-consumption curve. Only so much power; we have to be miserly with it...Goddamn! Is this what poverty is like? I never really understood before. Jenneth, you're not my 'poor relation' any more! We really are in the same boat....

He listened, as they all listened, to the progress reports of the approaching teams: their tricorder readings confirmed Bobby's, the mutters of hope, Bobby's swearing at the 'cat's lack of speed as he dug toward the buried treasure. At last Roantree and the other mining teams caught up with him, and the audio-receivers hummed with the carefully-spaced blasts of phaser-fire. Kirk shut his eyes and sank his mind into the web of sound, trying to picture what was happening. There was the steady thudding of the 'cat's belt as it carried away the pulverized rock, and there was the muffled vibration of the 'cat's engine as it widened the narrow tunnels made by the humming phasers, and there was the spaced warbling of tricorders as they measured the way to the unseen hoard.... And then there was a sudden hissing of steam and a chorus of explosive oaths.

"Ice pocket!" Bobby screeched in fury. "Less than 10 meters to go, and we hit a goddamned ice pocket! Now it'll take hours. Damn!"

"Take it easy, Bobby." Roantree's voice was incredibly calm and reassuring. "It's just a minor setback. Give us time to get back and reset the belt, and then you go ahead with the 'cat. No need to rush it. We've got time."

There was a soft thudding of retreating footsteps, a metallic noise that was doubtless the resetting of the belt, Roantree's weary order to "dig safety niches", a slight chorus of grumbling, brief hums of phaser-fire, the slowed thumping of the 'cat digging cautiously through the ice, and Bobby's steady frustrated swearing. Age-long minutes of waiting were rewarded with a grinding hump and a yell of outrage.



"She's jammed! The mother-raping 'cat went and jammed! Now we'll have to stop and fix the stupid thing, and that'll take an hour at least, and the crystals are so damned close...."

"Cool down, Bobby," Roantree soothed. "We'll get the crystals soon enough. Just be patient...."

"Patience, my ass! Only 7 meters - I could phaser the damned ice out. Screw it, I will!"

"Bobby, no! The steam...." Roantree's warning shout was drowned in a phaser hum, and then the grinding roar of an explosion.

"Uhura, screen on!" Kirk shouted, his eyes snapping open. "Fix on that audio-signal."

Quannechota rattled off a string of co-ordinates, her voice level but fast.

The screen flared awake on a scene of chaotic motion and tossing green light and rolling clouds of steam and dust. The Anarchists, their Luciferin lights bouncing on their belts, unrecognizable in the confusion, clawed their way through the maelstrom, past the digger-cat, whose forward drill was buried in a landslide of ice-shards. They threw aside stones and boulders of ice, swearing and shouting directions and information to each other, as the steam refroze and frosted their suits. Above the noise of the shouting and frantic digging came an irregular, thin, moaning wail that chilled the spines of all who could hear it.

"Nom de la Mere, he's still alive!" Roantree's voice was ragged with strain. "There! He's there! Aim for the green glow! Topside, if you cn hear me, get the medical team down here fast. And somebody get a patch-kit; his suit may be ruptured. Dig! Dig!"

Kirk dug his fingers into the chair-arms until they turned bloodless. "Quannechota," he asked levelly, "can we afford the energy to trasnport him out of there?"

"No," she said, "not through that depth of rock. The power expenditure would deplete the ship past the danger point. If you wish the exact figures...."

"Damn your figures!" Kirk raged, realizing he was being unfair, but needing to lash out at something. "That boy's one of your people, your crew, and he may be dying! We could save him if we could get him up here in time!"

"Citizen," Quannechota answered him quietly, "Robert Prentiss is not a 'boy'; he is 18 years of age, and our people formally become adults at the age of 15. He knew, as we all did, that there would be great dangers involved in helping you; and he agreed, with the rest of us, to risk those dangers. It is most unlikely that this ship's medical equipment, at our present level of energy-depletion, could give him a better chance of survival than the camp-hospital could. Transporting him quickly from the rubble would improve his chances somewhat, but it would greatly endanger the ship - and with it, the best hope of survival for all of us. He would not wish to better his odds at such a price - nor would any of us."

How can you be so sure? Kirk raged silently. How do you know what that boy would choose, or what he's thinking down there under a ton of ice? "I know," he admitted bitterly. "We don't have any choice." He kept his eyes on the screen, silently cursing the ship's poverty that made him so helpless, and watched as the Anarchists finally dug down to the source of the green glow and the unending sounds of pain.

Bobby-the-'Prentice still clutched the phaser in one hand. Roantree gently tried to pull it away, but his fingers were frozen around it and refused to unlock. He had thrown both arms across his face, which had probably kept his helmet from breaking, and his suit showed no evidence of leakage. That was exactly all of him that was undamaged. As the other Anarchists pulled the ice-shards away from him, it became grimly obvious that most of his body was crushed. The suit-legs were as limp as if they'd been empty, and his chest was grotesquely lopsided. His eyes were wide open in a face washed blank by pain. The rescuers looked at him, then at each other, wordlessly exchanging the same obvious thought: How did he last this long?

Ann Bailey crouched beside him in the ice and carefully raised his head. The mindless wailing stopped, and Bobby turned his eyes toward her, recognized her, and struggled to form words. "There," he whispered. "It's that way. There." He slowly straightened one arm and pointed.

All the Anarchists turned to look, as he indicated, toward a stretch of bared rock - all except Bailey who was the only one to see Bobby's face go slack and empty, and his arm fall back on the ice.

Bailey sat motionless beside the body for a long moment. Kirk sat frozen in his seat, watching the whole stark proof of Quannechota's words, the cold equations, and the Anarchists' acceptance of them. Then Bailey took the phaser out of the limp hand and stood up. Roantree noticed the motion, saw the phaser in her hand, looked at the body and then back to Ann Bailey's set face. "Can it be done?" was all she said.

Bailey glanced at the tunnel ceiling, nodded, and aimed carefully at the bare rock wall while the others drew back. She fired for precisely half a second, and the rock evaporated as quietly and harmlessly as mist, leaving a rough narrow tunnel in the stone.

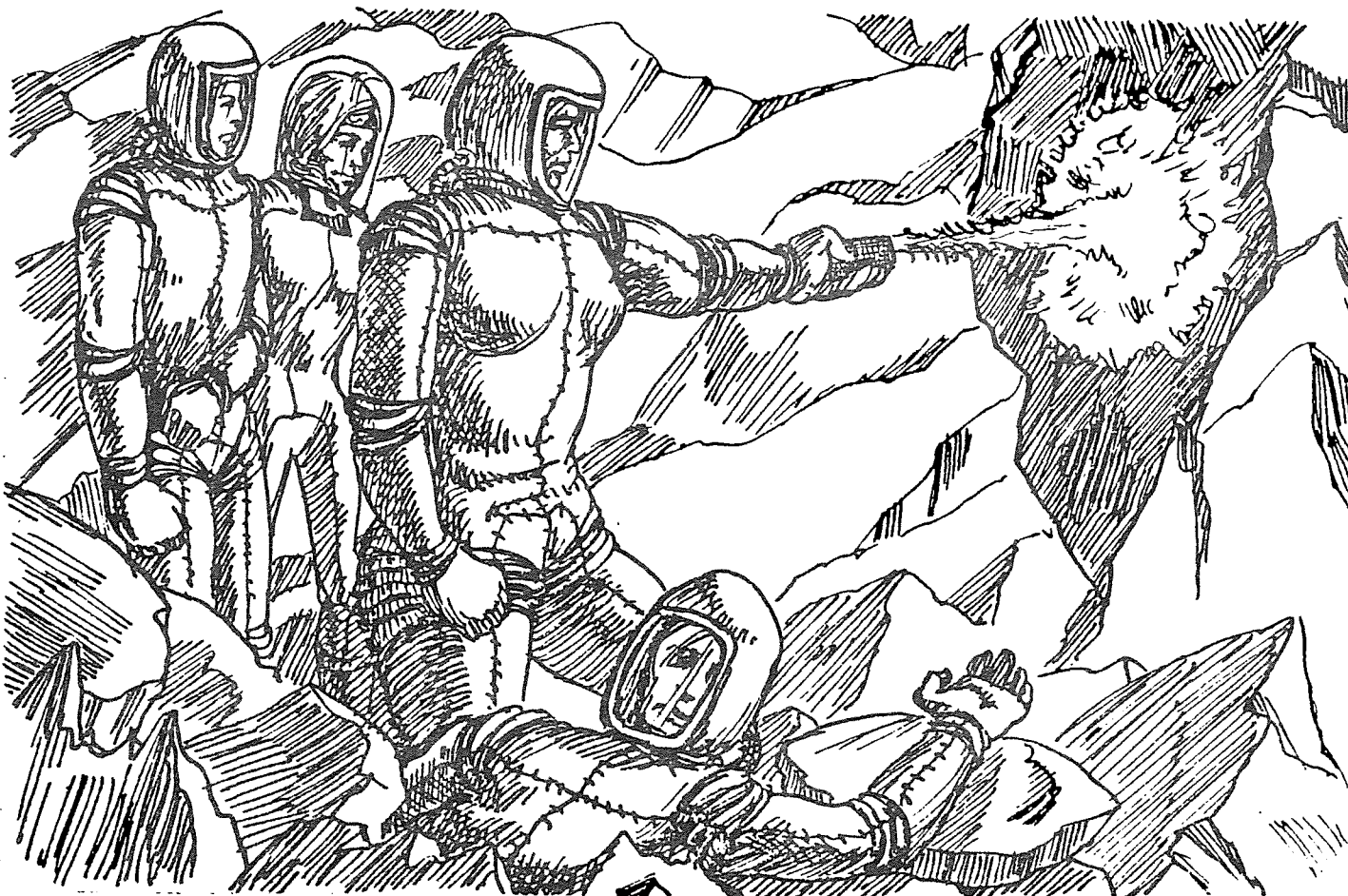
"It's in there," she said gruffly. "Go get it."

Roantree stepped forward without a word, climbed across the piled ice-shards, and pulled herself into the jagged tunnel. Everyone waited, ~~unmoving~~, as the sounds of her progress and the green glow of her lamp dwindled. After long moments came the faint warbling of a tricorder, then a brief silence, and then a phaser's hum.

"It's here, all right." Her voice came back over the intercom. "It's a short vein, but a thick one."

"All right," said Bailey. She turned back to the mangled body in the ice, crouched down beside it and lifted it in her arms. The legs hung wrong. For a moment Kirk thought he was going to be sick.

"Citizen Kirk," Quannechota's voice startled him. "We have used up our allotted viewing time for the next four hours."



"Turn off the screen," he said, grateful for an excuse not to see any more. It was bad enough to hear the sounds that followed: footsteps creaking slow and irregular over the treacherous ice, one voice breathing laboriously under the effort of an awkward burden, and several voices sobbing quietly.

"Another voice cut in, panting and weary and all too recognizable: "Brother Jim, if you can hear me, beam me up. I've got it."

"Beam...?" Kirk started to ask. Then he understood. "Uhura, relay co-ordinates to transport. Quan... ah, Mr. Sulu, you have the con. I'll be in the transporter room." He got up and almost ran to the turbolift, leaving Sulu and Uhura exchanging looks behind him.

Kirk got to the transporter room just as Scott, nervously hoarding every iota of ship's power, was pulling the energizing controls down. The familiar sparkle appeared on the platform and solidified into Jenneth Roan-tree, her space armor dusted with frost and pulverized rock, swaying a little as she adjusted to the higher gravity of the ship. Her lamp was still glowing at her shoulder, and under the helmet her face was set and tear-streaked. In her hands was a raw chunk of bright gold-yellow crystal, as big around as a suited man's arm.

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Captain's Log, Stardate 6071.3.

WE HAVE IT: THE PRICE OF A UNIVERSE, AT THE COST OF A MAN'S LIFE - OR NINE, IF YOU COUNT THOSE WHO DIED AT THE LANDING, AS JENNETH DOES. SCOTTY AND HIS TEAM SPENT HALF THE NIGHT REFINING AND INSTALLING THE CRYSTALS, AND THE SHIP IS BACK TO 71% POWER. NOT ENOUGH, BUT A BEGINNING; AND THERE ARE MORE CRYSTALS WHERE THAT ONE CAME FROM. BUT HOW MANY MORE LIVES WILL IT TAKE?

WHEN JENNETH STEPPED OFF THE TRANSPORTER PAD SHE HANDED THE CRYSTAL TO SCOTTY AS IF IT WERE SACRED, AND HE TOOK IT IN MUCH THE SAME SPIRIT.

WHEN I CAME TOWARD HER, HER HANDS TURNED INTO FISTS. "GO AHEAD AND HIT ME," I SAID. "IT MIGHT MAKE US BOTH FEEL BETTER." I MEANT IT, TOO. BUT SHE DIDN'T DO IT. SHE UNCLENCHED HER HANDS AND MUTTERED: "NOT REALLY." THEN SHE SAT DOWN ON THE EDGE OF THE PAD AND PUT HER FACE IN HER HANDS AND STARTED CRYING.

I HONESTLY DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO. SCOTTY HURRIED OFF WITH THE CRYSTAL AND LEFT ME ALONE WITH HER, AND I COULDN'T THINK OF ANYTHING TO SAY, OR ANY WAY TO HELP. FOR A MINUTE, I SWEAR, ALL I COULD THINK OF WAS THAT SHE CAN CRY AND I CAN'T AND SHE REALLY IS A WOMAN AND NOT JUST ME WITH - DELETE THAT. I WAS ASHAMED THEN, AND I SAT DOWN BESIDE HER AND PUT MY ARM AROUND HER SHOULDERS. SHE SWORE AT ME IN QUEBECOIS FOR AWHILE, AND THEN SHE DRIED HER EYES AND BEGAN TO TELL ME ABOUT BOBBY-THE-'PRENTICE. I WISH I'D KNOWN SOME OF THOSE THINGS BEFORE HE DIED, WISH I'D KNOWN HIM BETTER...DAMMIT! AM I GOOD FOR ANYTHING NOW, BESIDES REGRETS?

SHE WANTED TO GO BACK DOWN, BUT I PERSUADED HER TO STAY AND GET SOME SLEEP FIRST. I TOOK HER DOWN TO MY CABIN, CALLED SCOTTY AND ASKED IF HE COULD SPARE SOME SCOTCH. HE BROUGHT IT HIMSELF, AND QUANNA CAME IN RIGHT BEHIND HIM, AND WE HAD A QUIET LITTLE PRIVATE WAKE. JENNETH FINALLY FELL ASLEEP IN MY BED. QUANNA STARTED TO LEAVE, BUT I TOLD HER TO STAY WITH JENNETH AND I LEFT INSTEAD. I THINK I MEANT TO GO TO ONE OF THE SPARE CABINS, BUT I WAS PRETTY DRUNK MYSELF BY THEN AND I LOST TRACK OF DIRECTIONS. I DON'T REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED NEXT, BUT I WOKE UP THIS MORNING IN SPOCK'S OLD CABIN, NOT SURE HOW I GOT THERE, BUT FEELING MUCH BETTER.

JENNETH WENT BACK DOWN THIS MORNING. QUANNA'S BACK AT WORK AS IF NOTHING HAD HAPPENED. SCOTTY'S BUSY NURSING THE ENGINES. I'M NOT EVEN HUNG OVER, AND I SHOULD BE. THINGS ARE LOOKING UP...I HOPE. AT LEAST AFTER THIS WE'LL BE ABLE TO LEAVE THE VIEWSCREEN ON.

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Uhura leaned back in the Galileo's third seat and let herself relax while she could. The shuttle would reach Camp Clavius in 20 minutes. It should take at least 10 minutes to unload the cargo. After that it was anyone's guess how long it would take for her to get some time alone with Christine Chapel. I'll probably have to spend the first few hours checking the suits' com-sets, she thought wryly. After all, that's my excuse for being here. It took me nearly two weeks to find a way around Quannechota's watchfulness.... The energy-output for a tight-beam person-to-person call would have been hard to disguise, harder to explain.... She closed her eyes and mentally reviewed the proposed improvements in the Anarchists' old-suit radios and walky-talkies (ridiculous word!) that would eliminate some of the problems with the communications-net. It wouldn't be too hard to convince Sparks; he had been the one who brought it to her attention that some of the elements in the High Harbor-made radios were deteriorating in the cold of the weeks-long lunar night.

"Landing in 5 minutes," Sulu announced. "There's Camp Clavius - and quite a sight she is, too."

Uhura opened her eyes, looked past the helmsman to the forward screen, and saw that he wasn't exaggerating. On the dark crater floor the Anarchists' camp stood out like a Christmas tree seen from above, a wheel of clustered lights studding the dark plain with stars of blue-white and soft green and gold. The gold light was a gift from the Engineering Department; lamps and a small atomic generator, supplementing and then replacing the Anarchists' little alcohol-fueled pony-engine, furnished powered lights to all the domes instead of just the hydroponics gardens, and even allowed a length of strong lights in the main mining gallery. The Anarchists, she remembered from Scotty's embarrassed description, had been as grateful and delighted as children on Christmas morning. And Christmas is coming! she thought with a start. Less than a month...we let Thanksgiving slip by without a thought, and the Captain's usually so insistent about that.... Where has the time gone? No, don't think about time.

"Landing in 3 minutes," Sulu announced. "Seal your helmets, please."

Uhura wrestled her helmet into place, hating the clumsy thing, swearing silently in Swahili at the Captain's ban on environmental-field belts. Afraid of offending the Anarchists' feelings, or pride, or superstitions, or something, she thought sourly, nothing that she'd split a fingernail down to the quick. Then again, if the Anarchists were all willing to use the aura-belts, or even our suits, I wouldn't be here.... I wonder how Ensign Jalina is managing my station. She's competent at regular work, but I hope there are no emergencies.

The Galileo landed softly. Sulu waited for a moment while the air-pumps whined to a stop, then opened the lock and led the exodus. Uhura shouldered her share of the crates, impressed by how much she could carry in the moon's slight gravity, and followed the procession into the storage dome. Sparks was waiting for her, his long hair and beard almost filling his helmet, wide grin almost splitting his big cheerful face. Behold; a friendly bear, she thought.

"Oh, Mama, but I'm glad to see you!" Sparks bellowed warmly. "We've had two more suit-radios and a 'talky go out on us since yesterday. You'll have your work cut out for you when the shift changes."

"Shift-change? When will that be?" she asked, hiding her delight at this stroke of luck.

"Not for another five hours. Would you like a nap, or a bath? Sorry, but we won't have dinner for a couple hours yet."

"No, no, that's all right, thank you. I'd like to go to the medical section and see some friends. Could you please unload these crates for me?" She gave him her best smile, but it wasn't necessary. Sparks dug into the crates like a puppy with a fresh steak-bone, and scarcely noticed as she slipped away to the inner airlock.

Ten minutes later, in one of the tiny sleeping-room domes off the hospital-shelter, she managed to talk privately with Christine Chapel.

"Chris, you're looking very well," Uhura opened, as she settled on one of the sleeping-bags that were the dome's only furniture. "Life in the Rough must agree with you."

"You're flattering me," Christine smiled - actually smiled. "Sleeping on floors, living in constant moon-dust, working a 12-hour shift and sharing one tub with 40-odd shaggy Anarchists - that's hardly a beauty treatment."

"Seriously, aside from the dust and fatigue, you look a lot better." Uhura sipped her cupful of thawed fruit juice and added carefully, "You seem more...relaxed, and involved."

"Too busy to grieve, you mean. I discovered long ago that work is the best cure for personal troubles. I think my problem for the first few months was that I didn't have enough to do...and, yes, too many familiar faces. It's different here."

"Is it?" Uhura nudged toward her subject. "What's it like, working with them?"

"Interesting, fatiguing, bizarre...." Christine leaned back on her sleeping-bag and tugged idly at the collar of her fatigue-duty jumpsuit. "They're amazing people. They seem to discuss things forever before making any decision, but once they've decided on a course of action they'll work themselves nearly to death to finish it. Did you know that they formally become adults at 15, then spend the next 50 years at hard physical labor? All of them, men and women, work as farmers and soldiers in addition to their personal professions... or they used to anyway. They rarely lived beyond 65, usually died of the effects of overwork or violence."

"Horrible!" Uhura shuddered. "I suppose that's what one can expect of a savage world."

"But they're not exactly savages," Christine insisted. "Oh, they have some startling personal customs... absolutely no sense of sexual embarrassment, for example - but basically...well, they're gentle and brave and kind and strong...and quite intelligent. Don't make the mistake of under-rating them because they're technologically two centuries behind us, or of assuming that they're superstitious because of their weird religion, or that they're socially divisive because they're dedicated Anarchists. They...oh, I can't explain it very well except to say that they have a culture that produces effective and extraordinarily tough people. They'd be valuable - and viable - in any sane universe."

"It's hard not to admire them, watching them break their backs for us," Uhura admitted. All right so most of this is purely personal foibles! If their customs upset me, that's my fault. But there's still that

one undeniably disturbing effect.... No blame to them, but it's still there. "But Chris, how do you deal with the fact that they are...parallels of...of us?"

"The best way to deal with that right now is to ignore it!" Christine slapped her cup down on the floor, so hard that she startled Uhura. "Oh, I'm sorry, Upenda. Didn't mean to snap, but that's something of a sore subject down here. The volunteers who come down from the Enterprise sometimes become preoccupied, even obsessed, with finding which of the Anarchists are their other selves. In a few cases where they find - or think they've found - their 'doppelgangers', the relationships between them become...distinctly odd. Not so much on the part of the Anarchists, oddly enough; it's our people who are most affected by the 'Doppelganger Complex.' I don't yet know why, although I have several theories. I've been trying to keep notes in my scanty spare time, and if we ever get back to the Federation, I'll have one hell of a paper on the subject."

"Be sure to give me copies." Uhura managed a jaunty smile. I have to know what's happening to the Captain! "What are the effects?"

"It varies from individual to individual." Christine refilled her cup from a thermos flask and warmed to her subject. "Obsessive attention, as I said: irrational reactions - blind love, hate, fear, rivalry - all very subjective. It seems to depend on the person's basic attitudes toward himself. I think it's amplified by the Anarchists' innocent lack of inhibitions; they don't seem to have any barriers between their conscious and subconscious minds, between emotion and intellect...." Her attention wandered for a moment, but she quickly pulled it back. "They don't repress anything; it's all out on the surface, and to some people that's like meeting their own naked Ids fact-to-face. It can be terribly disturbing."

"No doubt." Uhura shivered. What does he think of himself, after all these months of guilt and loneliness? Especially now - sitting helpless on the ship, with his fate in the hands of these...these shaggy primitives? And one of them his own mirror-image, his ID? 'Through a glass, darkly'.... "How do you handle it? I mean, what do you recommend for such cases?"

"For now, all I can do is tell them to think of the Anarchists as aliens - complete, utter aliens - and to ignore the whole business of parallels. We've had enough experience at dealing with alien cultures; we can understand them, even admire them, and deal with them rationally on those terms. As aliens, they're comprehensible and likeable; as our doppelgangers, they're confusing and frightening. Best stick with what we can handle now, and deal with the identity problem after everything else has been cleared up."

"Yes, very sensible...." ...as Quannechota would say! Should I broach this at all? Would she really want to know? Test. Oblique approach. "But tell me, how do our people react to meeting, er, doppelgangers of people other than themselves? Friends, for example, or...."

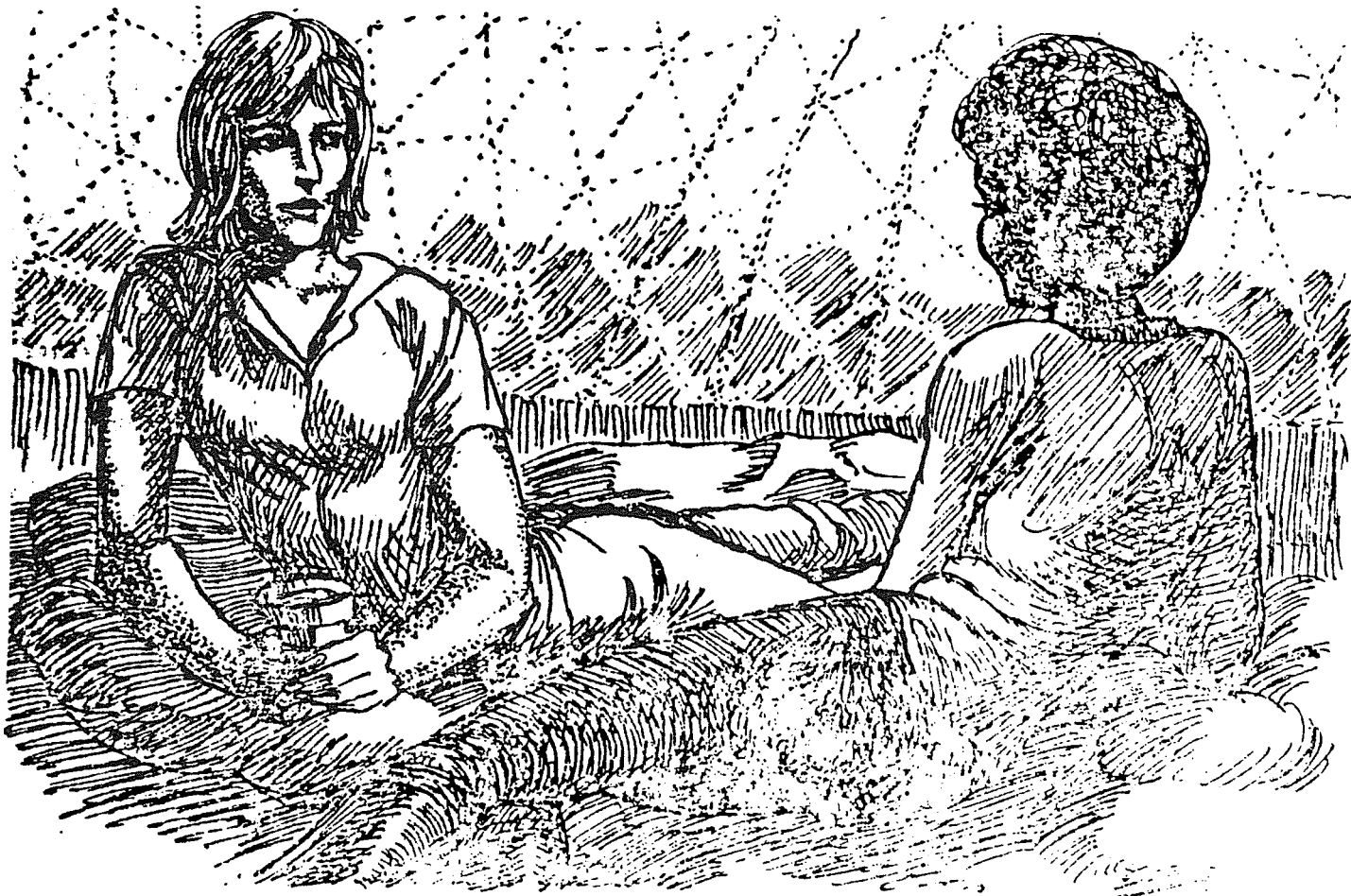
"Come clean, Upenda. I know where this is going." Christine fixed her with a knowing look. "You're referring to Jenneth Roantree, aren't you?"

"Ah, I see I wasn't very subtle...." Uhura recovered quickly. Test? This will do. "All right. Chris, what do you think of...of Citizen Roantree?"

"I wish I could take my own advice." Christine emptied her cup and set it down. "Most of the time I can think of her as an alien, and as such she's...well, amazing. I've never seen a better argument against Starfleet's admitted prejudices about women in Command positions. Remember that talk we had after the Janice Lester affair?"

"Indeed I do. I've been trying steadily - or I was, before all this happened - to collect solid examples of qualified women commanders. There were so few.... Oh! I see what you mean!"

"Precisely." Christine gave her a conspiratorial grin. "The Anarchists desperately want to get to our time-line, and I can think of several good reasons for taking them with us."



"Especially Jenneth Roantree! Chris, if I recall Federation law accurately, a 'ranking Captain' from another society - any society - retains his - or her rank in Federation space...Hmmm, that's an idea with tremendous possibilities.... But, as you were saying?"

"Yes, 'Co-Ordinator' Roantree - a first-class commander, and among a group of Anarchists, yet! She's brilliant, talented, brave, strong...almost frighteningly strong; she makes me feel inadequate at times.... And of course, she's as open and friendly and cheerfully uninhibited as the rest of them - and perceptive, and kind. All our Captain's virtues, with a few more of her own. She seems larger than life, like something out of our childhood dreams. She's someone you can't help but admire, so long as she's an alien...."

"How easy is it to see her that way?" Uhura asked carefully.

"Fairly easy, most of the time, if you work at it," Christine frowned and studied the inside of her cup. "But inevitably, at least once a day, she'll do or say something that's undeniably like the Captain... I mean, so exact that it's eerie! A phrase, a gesture, a tone of voice, a reaction to a crisis - it can be anything. There's no way to predict it. And then, suddenly she's - she is Captain James T. Kirk, strangely altered, turned inside out, grown bigger and darker and deeper and - it's frightening! I almost want to shake her and shout: 'Captain, what's happened to you?' It's almost as if the Captain had become a shape-shifter... something like Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde, or a legendary werewolf...Yes, a werewolf! He turns into a woman when he's on the moon!"

They both burst out laughing, and it was several minutes before they could stop. Neither of them cared to admit how much of it was hard-held hysteria.

"Seriously, though," Christine wiped her eyes and went resolutely back to the subject. "Seriously, it's enough to keep me awake at nights, thinking deep philosophical thoughts about 'what is identity.' I know that the Captain considers her his twin sister - and that's the best compromise I can imagine, under the circumstances, but it doesn't solve the secondary problem."

"Secondary problem?" Uhura resisted an urge to tear her hair. "Then there's still more to this?"

"Oh yes. The secondary problem is the reverse of the first one," Christine explained. "If Jenneth Roan-tree can be so much like the Captain, then he can be like her, too. Think, Upenda. Imagine James Kirk as an embattled Anarchist leader! Seriously, think about that; isn't there a streak of her stubborn, determined rebelliousness in him, too?"

"You're right," Uhura whispered, thinking of the implications. "She's less inhibited, expresses things he only hints at, but...Yes, he could be everything that she is - everything! Oh Djamballa!" Yes, yes, he could be a shameless savage, if he dared! She's not just a cruel parody of the Captain, but a frightening prophecy! "Christine, what will happen when she's turned loose in our universe? What will she do to him, and all of us?"

"She'll probably have as much trouble adjusting to our society as we do to hers. She may not be able to cope at all, once she learns that there are such things as governments in our time-line." Christine glanced apprehensively at the undisturbed airlock. "If we want her to remain a good example for our little campaign against Starfleet's prejudices, we'll have to prepare for the inevitable discovery...." She stopped, seeing that Uhura wasn't listening. "Penny for your thoughts, Upenda."

"Adjustment...." Uhura murmured. "I think you've adjusted to this whole business better than any of us. Christine, can I talk to you about Spock?"

"Yes, go ahead," Christine replied wearily, wondering about the change of subject. "Don't worry about hurting me; I've thought about him these last few months until I've worn away most of my grief. I never really had him, anyway; there was little besides hope to lose."

"Christine," said Uhura, firmly setting down her cup. "I have reason to believe that Spock, too, has a parallel in this time-line. I think he's here - but not in a form anyone expected and just as...inaccessible. It's just a suspicion; but, Chris, would you really want to know?"

Christine sat perfectly still for a long moment. "I'm not sure, Upenda," she finally said. "I'll have to think it over."

Uhura never did decide what she would have said next, for right then Christine's communicator bleeped.

"Doc, we're gonna need you!" Sparks' voice was unusually rattled. "Another cave-in - bottom level, new North tunnel. They hit ice with a vacuum pocket above it, and 20 meters of roof came down. There's four people trapped in there - and one of 'em's Jenneth!"

"On my way," Christine replied, changing to network frequency as she grabbed her suit. "Emergency team, move out: gallery three, tunnel nine. Full cave-in rescue gear. Main medical team, standby. Chapel, out."

"Let me help," said Uhura, scrambling into her suit. "If the victims were wearing the old suits, their radios may be out. You'll need help to locate the survivors."

"Come on then," Christine agreed, reaching for the lock-release. Uhura picked up her helmet and followed her out.

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Captain's Log, Stardate 6088.4.

ANOTHER CAVE-IN, A BIG ONE, AND JENNETH'S TRAPPED IN IT. WE'RE TRYING TO LOCATE THE VICTIMS WITH THE SHIP'S SENSORS, BUT WE'VE RUN INTO TROUBLE. APPARENTLY THE CAVE-IN OCCURRED NEAR A DEPOSIT OF SOME ENERGY-SENSITIVE MINERALS - POSSIBLY DILITHIUM - AND THE SENSORS CAN'T FOCUS ON THE SITE. RESCUE TEAMS ARE TRYING TO PHASER THEIR WAY THROUGH THE RUBBLE, BUT IT'S SLOW WORK. THE TRICORDERS CAN'T READ THE AREA VERY WELL EITHER, AND

THE RESCUE TEAMS HAVE TO PROCEED ONLY A METER AT A TIME FOR FEAR OF HITTING THE SURVIVORS. WE'RE GETTING CONFUSED AUDIO SIGNALS TOO, AND ENSIGN JALINA CAN'T SORT THEM OUT.

IF JENNETH DIES, I DON'T KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN. I DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH CONTROL SHE HAS OVER THE REST OF THE ANARCHISTS, HOW MUCH OF THIS PROJECT IS HER IDEA... WILL THEY REFUSE TO GO ON WITHOUT HER? I DON'T KNOW. SHE'S GOT TO SURVIVE! I KNOW SHE ISN'T DEAD YET - ONE OF THOSE SIGNALS MUST BE HERS - AND WE'VE GOT TO FIND HER.

THANK GOD! UHURA JUST BEAMED UP!

* * * * *

Uhura ran onto the bridge, still in her suit. The first thing she did was chase the hapless Ensign Jalina away from the board and sit down at it herself. The next thing she did was call Sparks Vanderhoof.

"Sparks, was the Braider wearing one of the old-style suits or one of ours?"

"She always wears the new ones," Sparks replied, "ever since Jack Reinhart said they were better. I don't know what the others are wearing."

"Fine. Now tell everyone except the cave-in victims to shut off their radios, tricorders, and everything else that can send out a signal - for exactly five minutes, no more and no less. Do you understand?"

"Right. Listen! Everybody except the caved-in: for the next five minutes, shut up, shut down, and sit tight! Do it!"

The frequency promptly went silent. Uhura gave a sigh of relief and began working the filters. "Mr. Scott," she announced without looking up, "I'm going to have to boost power to this board for a few minutes. I don't know how much that's going to drain. Please keep track of it." She bent over her board, working furiously. The bridge speakers filled with the echoing, garbled signal that was the only proof that any of the cave-in victims still lived. Slowly, echo by echo, the sound cleared and intensified.

"...hello, Enterprise? Sparks? Quanna? Can anyone hear me? Hello? Hello? Anyone...?" It was Roan-tree's voice, slow and infinitely weary.

"Co-ordinator, we are receiving," Uhura replied. "Keep talking; we are trying to locate you. Can you describe your position?"

"Enterprise? Yes. Hear you." There was definitely something wrong with that voice. "I'm in the safety niche. Just outside the ice-pocket. Blocked in. The roof fell."

"Can you put me through to her?" Quannechota asked politely. Surprised, Uhura nodded. Quannechota turned toward the speakers. "Co-ordinator, how large is the clear space around you?"

"Like a big roomy coffin...maybe 7 feet high, 4 wide 4 deep. Some rubble. I'm not quite alone in it."

"Who is there with you?"

"Part of Bettyann Emily. She's dead. Explosive decompression."

"Are you injured?"

"A little. Minor decompression shock. And I'm cold. My suit leaks. The cold's the worst. Hard to move...."

"Just a moment and...There. Got it!" Uhura cut in. "We have visual contact."



Her last words were unnecessary; everyone on the bridge could see the image that appeared on the screen. Jenneth Roantree sat half-sprawled against the rear wall of the stone niche, lit by the green glow of two lamps. Under her helmet her face was blank with fatigue beyond telling. Her hands were clenched tight on a fold of her suit, just above the belt, where a small rip was visible; clearly, nothing but the pressure of her hands was keeping it closed. Her suit was splashed from head to foot with frozen drops of red and pink and gray, and in front of her - half-buried in the fallen rock and ice - lay a body in an old-style suit, curiously deflated, with the helmet's face-plate blown out.

Explosive decompression... Kirk thought, unable to take his eyes off the screen. "Mr. Scott, can we afford the power-expenditure to beam her out of there?"

"Bear in mind," Quannechota cut in, "That the cause of our communications problem is a sizable vein of dilithium crystals nearby. There are no other survivors to be included in the beam-up."

"Aye, Sir," said Scott. "We can do it."

"Bring her up, then," Kirk stood up. "And take the con; I'll be in the transporter room. Uhura, tell Sickbay to stand by - and you'd better tell Sparks there's no more need to hurry."

It wasn't until he was in the turbolift that he turned and saw Quannechota less than a step behind him. At first it seemed quite natural for her to be there. Then for an instant he was jolted to realize that she'd left the bridge without permission. And then he remembered that she was, after all, an Anarchist - and not a member of his crew, but of Jenneth's.

The medical team was in the transporter room before them, and all of them waited silently while the transporter hummed. The sparkle-effect formed and faded, and left Jenneth Roantree sprawled on the platform, still

clutching her ruptured suit. For an instant nobody moved. Roantree raised her head and looked slowly around the transporter room until her gaze caught Quannechota. She let go of her suit, reached toward the Indian woman and abruptly collapsed.

The medical team converged on her, removing her helmet, taking tricorder readings, lifting her onto a stretcher and carrying her away. Kirk and Quannechota followed them silently all the way to Sickbay.

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Captain's Log, Stardate 6089.3.

THEY'VE PUT HER IN THE INTENSIVE-CARE UNIT. M'BENGA SAYS THE INJURIES ARE SERIOUS BUT NOT CRITICAL: FROSTBITE, EXPOSURE, SHOCK, LOCALIZED HEMORRHAGING AND DAMAGE TO SURFACE BLOOD-VESSELS - AND IT'S MOSTLY TAKEN CARE OF, AND SHE'LL BE BACK ON HER FEET IN A WEEK. HE SAYS IT LOOKS MUCH WORSE THAN IT IS, BUT IT LOOKS AWFUL. I GOT A GLIMPSE OF HER BEFORE M'BENGA CHASED ME OUT. GOD, THE BURST VEINS LIKE A THICK PURPLE NET ON THE WHOLE LEFT SIDE OF HER BODY...FOR A MINUTE I THOUGHT I WAS GOING TO PASS OUT. ALMOST DID. DAMMIT, WHY DOES SHE AFFECT ME THIS WAY? I'VE SEEN UGLY INJURIES BEFORE, AND NOT FELT AS SICK AS THIS....

QUANNA ALMOST DRAGGED ME BACK TO MY QUARTERS, HAULED MY CLOTHES OFF AND PUSHED ME INTO BED. I WAS TOO SHAKEN TO MOVE UNTIL SHE'D GONE OVER MY BACK A FEW TIMES, AND THEN THE REACTION CAME SO FAST THAT IT WAS LIKE A DAM BREAKING. SUDDENLY I NEEDED HER SO BADLY THAT I THOUGHT I'D BURST IF I DIDN'T HAVE HER. NO WARNING AT ALL! I REACHED UP AND GRABBED HER, AND PULLED HER DOWN BESIDE ME, AND THEN I PRACTICALLY POUNDED HER THROUGH THE MATTRESS. IT WASN'T PLEASURE SO MUCH AS UNSPEAKABLE RELIEF, DRAINING OFF SOME UNBEARABLE PRESSURE....

AFTERWARDS I FELL ASLEEP SO FAST THAT I'M STILL NOT SURE I DIDN'T FAINT. WHEN I WOKE UP QUANNA WAS RUBBING MY CHEST, ACTING AS IF NOTHING HAD HAPPENED. NO COMPLAINTS, NO COMMENTS, NO CHANGE: JUST QUIET AND COMFORTING AS ALWAYS. I REMEMBERED WHAT I'D DONE, REALIZED IT MUST HAVE BEEN MISERABLE FOR HER, AND I WAS ASHAMED. I'VE NEVER BEEN SO BAD-MANNERED IN BED IN MY WHOLE LIFE, NOT EVEN WITH THE CHEAPEST SPACE-PORT WHORE. QUANNA DIDN'T DESERVE THAT. I STARTED TO APOLOGIZE, BUT SHE SAID I DIDN'T NEED TO - THAT IT WAS ONLY TO BE EXPECTED, AND THAT PEOPLE OFTEN REACT THAT WAY AFTER A CLOSE BRUSH WITH DEATH AND MAIMING...BUT THAT DOESN'T MAKE SENSE; IT WASN'T ME THAT GOT CAUGHT IN THE CAVE-IN, OR WAS MANGLED AND ALMOST KILLED BY COLD AND DECOMPRESSION, OR HAD TO WATCH ONE OF MY CREWMEN DIE OF INTERNAL EXPLOSION ALMOST IN MY LAP - IT WAS JENNETH! NOT ME! SO WHY DO I FEEL LIKE THIS? WHAT'S HAPPENING TO ME?

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The duty-nurse fussed in whispers as she showed Kirk and Quannechota into the recovery-room, insisting that the patient had just been moved there an hour ago, and still wasn't out of danger, and needed rest and quiet, and would they please not stay too long. Kirk scarcely heard her; his attention was fixed on the limp body in the bed.

Roantree appeared to be asleep; the indicators insisted that she was drugged, but conscious. She still looked awful - haggard, pale, eyes sunk into shadowed pits in her drawn face. He lifted one of her hands and squeezed gently, and felt a faint answering pressure. Roantree's eyes flickered open, slowly focused on Kirk, then widened.

"...Sam?" she whispered. "Sam? But you're dead...Am I...?"

"No," said Kirk, wincing at his own memories. "Not Sam. I'm Jim, your alter-ego. You're on the Enterprise. We beamed you up, remember?"

"Enterprise...beamed...." She frowned slightly beginning to remember. "Yes. Crystals. The cave-in...." Then the horror surfaced. Roantree tensed and began to shake. "Oh, Mother! Bettyann! Her face-plate shattered! She burst! She...."

"Easy, Jenneth. It's over." Kirk squeezed her hand hard. "Try not to think about it. It wasn't your fault, and there was nothing you could do." God, how trite and shallow that sounds! No comfort at all...What can I do?

Quannechota took hold of Roantree's other hand and shoulder. "Jenneth," she said, quietly but urgently. The implication was clear: Remember who you are. Remember that you are needed. Remember that you are not alone.

Roantree considered all that, and slowly relaxed. The shaking subsided. "Thanks," she whispered. "Quanna, the others: did any of them survive?"

"No. They died instantly when the digger was crushed."

"The tunnel? The crystals?"

"The second shift finished clearing the tunnel. The first shift is proceeding toward the crystals. The teams should reach the large vein in four more days."

"Four days?! But it was so close.... Who's co-ordinating?"

"Bailey and Sparks," said Quannechota, looking uncomfortable.

"What? But they...Sparks isn't good at it, and Bailey's worse. They're used to machines, not dealing with people. How...." She struggled to sit up. "I've got to...."

Kirk pushed her firmly back down. "Lie down, Jenneth," he insisted. "You have to recover before you can be of any use to them."

"Damn!," she whispered as she fell back against the pillow, convinced by a stab of dizziness and pain. "But four days? Too slow. Someone's got to...Quanna, can you go down and do it?"

Quannechota shook her head. "I am needed here to monitor power outlays for both the ship and the camp... among other necessities." She glanced briefly at Kirk, who blushed.

Roantree tossed her head irritably on the pillow, then stopped and turned to look at Kirk, her eyes blazing as an idea took form. "You, Jim," she said. "You can do it. You're a trained Co-ordinator - of a bigger crew than mine. You have the skill, as good as mine. You're me. They'll accept you. Do it, Jim. Go down there and co-ordinate for Camp Clavius. Please!"

"You want me to take...take charge of your crew?" Kirk turned hot and cold by rapid turns as he realized what she was offering him. "Do you really think they'd have me?" Am I sure I could do it? Command a gang of Anarchists.... How?

"Yes! Do it!" Roantree clutched his hand with a grip that was almost painful. "They'll accept - I'll send a tape, explaining...."

"No, I shall make the tape," said Quannechota. "You must rest."

"I'll do it," Kirk said. "I'll do right by your crew, Jenneth. If they'll have me, I'll do my best."

"I shall persuade them," Quannechota added. She leaned forward and rubbed her fingers in slowly widening circles across Roantree's forehead and temples. "Rest now. Rest. Be still. Rest."

"All right...." Roantree visibly relaxed, and her breathing deepened. "Go, soon. Next shift. Thanks, Jim. Thanks...." Her eyes drifted closed, and her hand slowly relaxed in Kirk's grip. "...Very good to have a brother again...." she murmured drowsily. "I'm tired of singing Death-Songs...." With a last long sigh, she dropped into sleep like a stone into deep water.

On the way to the turbolift, Kirk thought to ask Quannechota what a "Death-Song" was.

"It is a song especially adjusted to cause death," Quannechota explained, a faint grimness showing about her eyes. "It is a particular song with great emotional effect on the individual, which is conditioned into the parasympathetic nervous system in such a way that the singing or even hearing of it, when one is in a particular mood, will cause the heart to stop."

"Oh." Kirk shivered, thinking that over. "Why did Jenneth say she was tired of singing them? What does that mean?"

"That may be difficult to explain." Quannechota frowned as she stepped into the turbolift with him. "You come from an easier place. Can you understand that there are conditions under which one would sensibly choose not to live any longer?"

"I...think so." I've seen some things worth dying for, and a few things worse than dying. "You mean, / it's used for...for suicide?"

"Yes. If one is not able to sing one's own Death-Song, one may properly ask a friend to do it. Often the task falls to the Co-ordinator, as it has recently. It is not a work which Citizen Roantree enjoys."

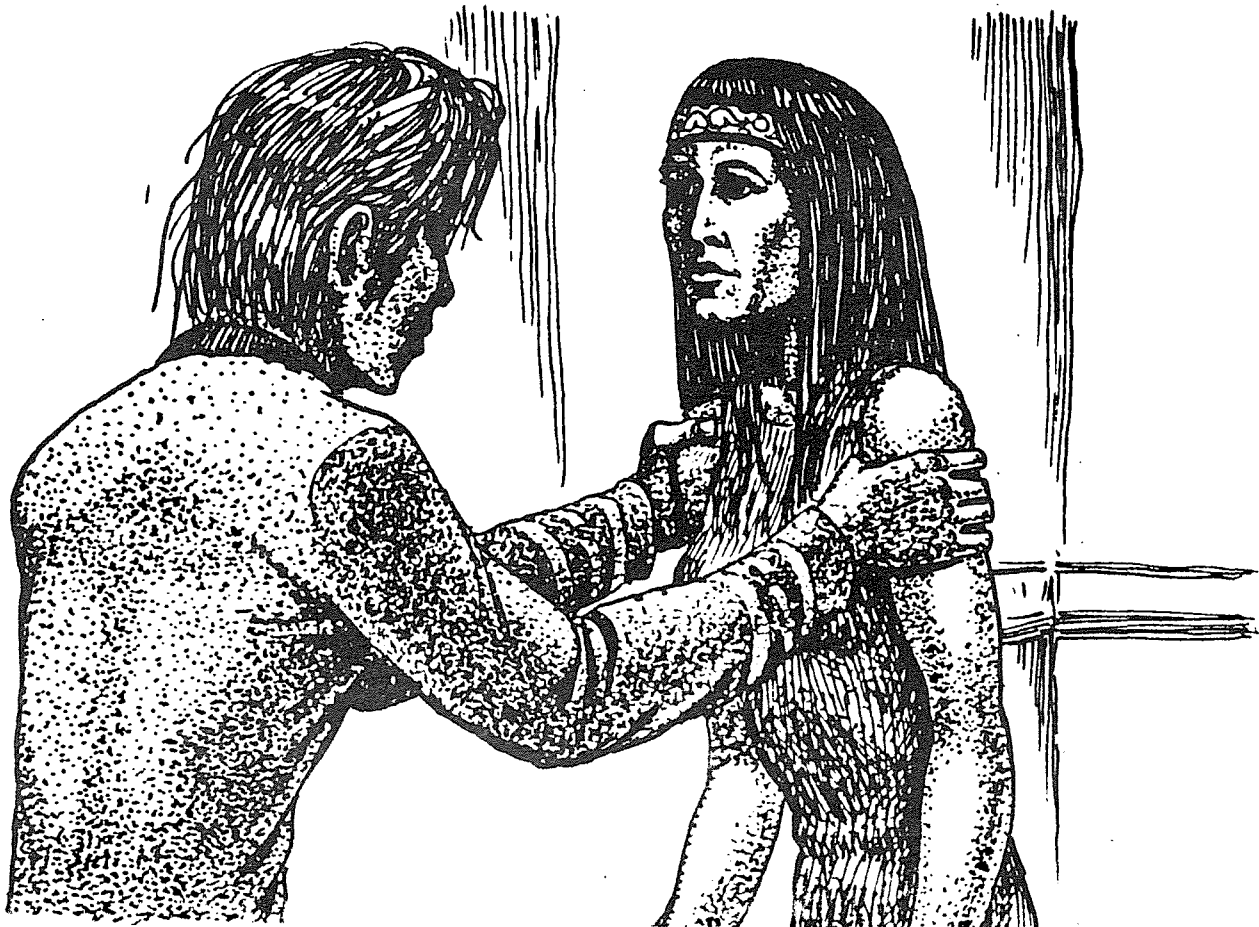
"A song for every purpose...." Kirk remembered, shuddering. "You mean...I might have to do that, down there? But I couldn't carry a tune in a basket!" Thank God I can't sing!

"If the occasion arises, you may have to make do with a weapon."

"Thanks, but no thanks! I'll leave that task to you, if you don't mind!"

"That is impossible, since I must remain here on the ship."

"You mean you're not coming with me? I thought you meant...when you said there were 'other necessities' keeping you here, besides monitoring...." An ugly suspicion chilled him. She's rather stay with Jenneth than with me! "All right...." He slumped against the cool metal of the turbolift wall. "I guess I deserve that. I've been pretty miserable at...at what you wanted when you came to me. I'm sorry I disappointed you."



"Disappointed...?" Quannechota stared at him, one eyebrow rising. "You did not disappoint me, Jim."

"You don't have to flatter me, Quanna. I know what a miserable lay I've been...." He stopped in mid-protest, belatedly noticing that this was the first time she'd ever used his first name.

"I expected less from you than I actually received." Quannechota almost smiled. "I cannot go with you to the moon because, aside from the need for monitoring the power-outlays, I now have physical limitations to consider. I am pregnant."

"Huh?!"

"I am carrying your child," she explained. "Less than a month, but with my physical problems I should begin taking precautions already."

"Carrying...my...child...." Kirk repeated, remembering another Indian woman saying those very words to him not so long ago, another primitive who had looked on him as a gift from heaven. Miramanee! Is that who she is? But that was on another world - but in this time-line, maybe the Preservers never came to take the Indians there.... Could it be? She doesn't look the same - much thinner - but Earth is a hard world now, no paradise.... I was married to Miramanee, and Quannechota is 'married' to the analogue of me.... Dear God, have I gotten her back again?

"What is wrong, Jim?" Quannechota was puzzled by his silence. "Are you displeased?"

"Displeased?! Oh no, no, just the contrary." Kirk settled his hands on her shoulders with infinite care, as if afraid that she might break, or that this whole expanding wonder might evaporate and leave another shattered dream.. "Mir...Quanna, I was just thinking that my dead could live again!"

"It is possible," she answered quietly. "That is one reason why we wish to come with you, across time."

"Yes! Yes! I'll take you with me," Kirk whispered ecstatically, wrapping her up in his arms, much to her surprise. "I won't lose you again!" Not even to my other self! I'll win you away from her. I'll make you love me again. Miramanee - Quannechota - say you love me! Say you love me best!

The turbolift hummed to a stop. They pulled away from each other quickly as the doors opened, and walked out onto the bridge as if nothing had happened.

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Project Tape R-97, Roantree recording.

ALL'S GOING WELL. I CAN WALK A LITTLE - HAVE TO, TO KEEP THE MUSCLES FROM STIFFENING - AND THE FROSTBITE'S WORN OFF. DR. M'BENGA OPERATED YESTERDAY TO CLEAN UP THE BURST VEINS, AND HE SAYS IT WASN'T AS BAD AS HE EXPECTED. I HAVE SOME AMAZING SCARS, BUT HE SAYS HE CAN CLEAN THOSE UP TOO IN A FEW WEEKS. INCREDIBLE MEDICINE THEY HAVE HERE! I'LL BE MY OLD SELF IN A FEW DAYS.

KIRK'S DOING WELL DOWN AT CAMP CLAVIUS; HE REPORTS THAT THEY'VE IDENTIFIED THE VEIN AS DEFINITELY DILITHIUM, AND THEY SHOULD REACH IT LATE TODAY. THE WORK'S SLOW BECAUSE OF ICE AND VACUUM POCKETS; APPARENTLY THE DAMNED THINGS ARE GEOLOGICALLY ASSOCIATED WITH THE DILITHIUM MINERAL BEDS. THEY'LL HAVE TO BE CAREFUL REMOVING THE CRYSTAL VEINS.

SPARKS TELLS AN INTERESTING TALE OF KIRK'S METHODS. YES, HE THINKS MY BROTHER'S A FINE CO-ORDINATOR - AS GOOD AS I AM, EVEN IF HE CAN'T SING. HE CAN MANAGE PRETTY WELL WITHOUT WORK-CHANTEYS, JUST KEEPING UP A CONSTANT PATTERN OF TALK AND ATTENTION. HE'S GOT THE TEAMS WORKING LIKE A FINE WATCH, AND SEEMS TO BE EVERYWHERE AT ONCE. ON THE OTHER HAND, HE CAN BE AS PRISSY AND IRRITABLE AS AN OLD MAID. HE FREAKS-OUT SO EASILY, SPARKS SAYS, THAT IT'S ALMOST A TEMPTATION TO PLAY PRANKS ON HIM.

EXAMPLE: WHEN HE FIRST BEAMED DOWN, EXPLAINED WHAT HE WAS DOING THERE AND PLAYED QUANNA'S TAPE, SPARKS WAS SO GRATEFUL TO GET OFF CO-ORDINATING AND GO BACK TO HIS BELOVED RADIOS THAT HE GAVE KIRK A BIG HUG. FREAK-

OUT! KIRK NEARLY JUMPED THROUGH THE CEILING. ANOTHER EXAMPLE: KIRK WAS RUNNING THROUGH INSPECTION OF THE DOMES WHEN JEAN BATTRE-LE-DIABLE - WHO CAN, ADMITTEDLY, BE A PAIN IN THE ASS SOMETIMES - COLLARED HIM WITH AN ENTHUSIASTIC RAP ON HOW NICELY THE PLANTS WERE GOING. KIRK WANTED TO GET ON WITH THE INSPECTION, AND TOLD JEAN OFF A BIT TOO IMPATIENTLY. JEAN, FEELING MIFFED, CALLED HIM A TYPICAL BARNYARD NAME. FREAK-OUT! KIRK HAD A TEMPER-TANTRUM. THIRD EXAMPLE: KIRK CAME IN AFTER SHIFT VERY PLAYED OUT - HE'S DEFINITELY NOT USED TO 12-HOUR SHIFTS - WANDERED INTO THE WRONG SLEEPING-DOME AND PASSED OUT ON HOT-TROT-PAULA'S SLEEPING BAG. SHE CAME IN, MADE THE UNDERSTANDABLE MISTAKE, AND CLIMBED IN WITH HIM. FREAK-OUT! KIRK JUMPED OUT THROUGH THE AIRLOCK, WITHOUT BOTHERING TO PUT ON HIS SUIT - OR HIS CLOTHES. HE WOULD HAVE SPENT THE NIGHT IN THE HYDROPONICS DOME IF SPARKS HADN'T FOUND HIM.

WELL, PART OF A BRAIDER'S JOB IS TO MAKE PEOPLE RELAX WHEN THEY NEED IT. I USE MY MUSIC FOR THAT, AND KIRK - CONSCIOUSLY OR NOT - USES LAUGHTER. THE CREW LIKES AND RESPECTS HIM, EVEN IF THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND HIM. THEY'RE WILLING TO WORK WITH HIM, AND IF ALL GOES WELL HE'LL BRING UP THE CRYSTALS IN ANOTHER DAY.

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Roantree finished the tape just as Quannechota came in with a late snack and two mugs of beer. She looked up, grinned, put the tape-recorder aside and moved over to make space on the bed. Quannechota sat down beside her and put the snack-tray between them. They each took a mug, lifted it in a silent toast, and drank.

"So, Quanna, how's your day been?" Roantree broke the congenial silence. "Anything interesting happen?"

"My watch has been happily uneventful," said Quannechota, setting down her mug. "The new crystals are holding well, although the older ones continue to deteriorate. Power-consumption is well within the allowed limits. Camp Clavius is also managing well; the solar batteries stored remarkable amounts of power during the sunlit weeks, and even if it were not for the advantage of the gift engine, they could provide power well into the next daylight phase."

"Glad to hear it," said Roantree. When will I learn? Ask her a general question about herself, and she'll always talk about her work. "More specifically, what did the ship's doctor say about your pregnancy?"

Quannechota lifted her mug and studied its contents. "I was examined by Dr. M'Benga, who tells me that the fetus is developing normally, and that the scar tissue from the previous miscarriages should not present too much difficulty." Her voice was as flat and expressionless as the computer's.

"Good, good...." She's afraid. Don't push it. "Did you hear the tapes Sparks sent up?"

"Indeed." Quannechota raised her head and gave the faintest of smiles. "Our new brother has unconscious talents for co-ordination."

"'Unconscious' isn't the word for it," Roantree chuckled. "I swear, at times he acts like a nervous virgin at a Solstice rite.... Speaking of which, how long is it to Yule?"

"Two weeks, six and a half days. We shall have the crystals by then, if all goes well, and perhaps a new universe also."

"What a Yule-gift that will be...." Roantree lay back on the pillows and thought about that. She was quiet for so long that Quannechota began to worry about her.

"Wherever we hold the rite this year," she suggested, "would it not be wise to invite our new brother to attend? The celebration is justly famed for its 'loosening' effect."

"Yes, that's an idea." Roantree turned her attention to the thought. "If he can once become involved, it will shake him out of his shyness for good and all. I think it should be easy enough to get him involved, too; from what I've seen, it's common for people from his culture to shed their inhibitions with their sobriety and clothes...." She noticed Quannechota's suddenly-raised eyebrow. "What? Not so, Quanna? How's he been behaving with you?"

"Most oddly...." Quannechota interlaced her fingers and rested her chin against them. "On occasion he is as solicitous and thorough as yourself in good health. At other times, he comes to me only for relief from pain, and then is is peremptory and...puzzling."

"Puzzling? How?" For Quanna to mention it, he must do something really bizarre. "Is he harsh with you?"

"No, not at any time, not even at his worst. He is basically a kind and good-hearted man.... Indeed, being you, he could not be otherwise. Yet he is strangely inhibited. Have you noticed that he cannot cry?"

"What? Not at all?" Now that really is bizarre! If even Quanna noticed it.... "Not even as little as a Chippewa?"

"Not even at funerals nor feasts of the dead. For some reason which I do not understand, he does not dare to let himself cry. His body reflects it. He is afflicted with savage nightmares that leave him tense as wire, and he gains no relief on waking unless carefully aided. Also when he seeks to mate solely for comfort, he moves with an odd rhythm, as if he were sobbing violently with his whole body, and sometimes he faints afterward. It is most strange."

"Where on Earth did he get an inhibition like that?" Roantree puzzled. Perhaps not on Earth at all. Who knows where he's been, or what adventures he's had, out there in the stars...."

"This may change hereafter. He became extraordinarily tender when I told him I was pregnant, and changed remarkably in his behavior with me. If the child survives...."

"Dare to hope, Quanna. We have the starship's medicine this time."

"Yes, and we must take proper advantage of it." As if she'd thrown a switch, Quannechota turned all practicality again. "For yourself, that means rest. Finish the food, and I will dim the lights."

Roantree obediently demolished the bread-and-cheese, but took her time over the beer. Quannechota paused a moment near the light controls, then came back and sat down beside her. They finished their beers slowly, giving each other long thoughtful looks in the dim light. At last Roantree put her empty mug aside and began awkwardly pulling off her Sickbay bed-robe. Quannechota undressed too. Roantree carefully rolled onto her stomach, packing the pillows under her to keep pressure off the still-fresh wound, and quietly waited as Quannechota's hands descended, waiting for the deep, steady, purely therapeutic pressure to change, become lighter and quicker, less designed for relaxing muscles than for rousing nerves.

In the darkness above her, Quannechota softly began to hum a quiet, hypnotic, Chippewa medicine-chant.

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Captain's Log, Stardate 6093.4.

I CAN DO IT. I HAVEN'T LOST MY ABILITY TO COMMAND. I CAN EVEN HANDLE THIS INCREDIBLE GANG OF ANARCHISTS - BUT SO HELP ME, NEVER AGAIN! IT'S LIKE HERDING WATERBUGS! IT'S LIKE TRYING TO MAKE ALLEY-CATS WALK IN STRAIGHT LINES, OR SQUIRRELS APPRECIATE MOZART! IT'S ENOUGH TO MAKE ME TEAR MY HAIR! HOW DOES JENNETH DO IT WITHOUT GOING INSANE IN SHORT ORDER? ORDER - HAH! GIVE THEM AN ORDER AND, UNLESS IT'S AN OBVIOUS EMERGENCY, THEY'LL ALWAYS ASK WHY. EXPLAIN WHY, AND THEY'LL COME UP WITH A HALF-DOZEN SUGGESTIONS FOR DOING IT SOME OTHER WAY. INSIST THAT THEY DO IT YOUR WAY, AND THEY MOUTH OFF. LET THEM TRY TO DO IT THEIR WAY, AND THEY'LL OFTEN GO BACK TO DOING IT YOUR WAY. ARRGH! MADDENING! AND THE AFTER-SHIFT EVALUATIONS THAT TURN INTO PARTIES, AND THE GOSSIPING ON THE INTERCOM, AND THE GODDAM PRACTICAL JOKES EVERYWHERE EXCEPT IN THE MINE - NO, NEVER AGAIN! NEVER! I'D RATHER DEAL WITH KLINGONS, ROMULANS AND ADMIRAL KOMACK ON THE SAME DAY! JENNETH, GET WELL SOON! PLEASE!

...STILL, I HAVE TO ADMIT THAT THEY'RE EFFICIENT AT THEIR JOBS. ONCE THEY'VE FINALLY AGREED TO DO SOMETHING, THEY DO IT VERY WELL. THEY DO RESPECT SKILL: EXPERTISE IS EVERYTHING, AS JENNETH SAID. WE'LL BE NEEDING THAT WHEN THE NEXT SHIFT COMES ON. THE BIG CRYSTAL VEIN IS ONLY A FEW MINUTES AWAY, BUT GETTING IT OUT WILL BE TRICK

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"We can phaser it out if we're careful," Kirk said, studying the blurry tricorder readings. "Use the shortest distance setting, and pare the rock away slowly."

"If it's that delicate, shouldn't we use hand-chisels?" asked Crazy Dave, an assistant-mechanic whose usual job was repairing the digger-cats.

"No, no. The vibrations of the hammering would carry through the rock and jar things loose," said Sharon-the-Rockhound. She was a geologist, and spent most of her time studying the tricorders' mineral readouts. "Use the phasers already; it won't shake down the walls."

"Citizens, if we can please get on with this...." Kirk kept his voice calm. "Look, we can do it this way." He phasered off a thin layer of rock, then another, then a third. As he started on the fourth pass, the other two stepped up beside him and phasered off similar peelings as neatly as if they'd been doing it all their lives. I suppose I should know by now, Kirk thought, steadily wearing away at the stone. Show, don't tell.

Moments stretched, phasers hummed, the rock-face evaporated. Crystalline glints began to appear in the stone. "We're getting close," Kirk whispered, stroking the rock almost lovingly with blue phaser-fire. The glints became hairlines, then wood-grains, then finally a solid sheet with glittering smooth, honey-gold crystal. All three stopped firing at the same instant, stopped to look at the lovely, clear, indescribably valuable stone.

"Now what?" Crazy Dave whispered as if he were in church.

"Pare away the rock around it," Sharon-the-Rockhound whispered back. "Try to get it free-standing as much as possible."

"Right," Kirk hastily approved, remembering that he was supposed to be in charge, as the others stepped away from him and began phasering the rock to either side.

It took them over two hours. They moved slowly at first for fear of damaging the infinitely precious stone, and still slower after they felt the first tremors in the rock walls.

"It could be moon-quakes," Sharon considered. "The long night can cause terrific plate-stress.... Or it could be that the dilithium veins are all that hold up the roof."

"There has to be more support than this," Kirk replied, studying the emerging column of crystal. It was wider where it emerged from the ceiling than where it sank into the rough floor, but in general it was no thicker than a man's body. "That's not enough to hold up all those tons of rock, not all by itself."

"But it might be part of a very precarious system," Sharon insisted. "Can't your friends on the ship transport it out, and us with it?"

"No. The presence of the crystal plays hell with sensor reception. They couldn't focus well enough to beam it - and us - up safely."

"How do you mean 'safely?'" Crazy Dave asked. "What are the risks?"

"By 'safely' I mean 'coherently,'" Kirk replied, reminding himself to be patient. "We might come out the other end of the transporter, say, with the crystal reduced to its component minerals - with us permanently imbedded in it."

"Oh," Crazy Dave gulped. "So what do we do? Cut it fast and run like hell for the safe part of the tunnel?"

"Can you think of anything better?" Sharon replied.

"That's about it, Kirk agreed. "Cut it carefully, now."

"Best I can," Dave replied, readjusting his phaser's focus to tight-beam. "Hold it steady, and I'll cut fast."

Kirk and Sharon stood on either side of the column, holding it steady between them while Crazy Dave drew the phaser-beam carefully through the top of the crystal, and then the foot. All three of them held it and pulled it carefully out of its setting, and turned the great rough-cut gem on its side. Together they lifted it in their arms and began tiptoeing out of the treacherous hollow.

"Keep coming," Sparks called through the intercom. "Just make it as far as the first safety-niches, and we can help you from there."

They hadn't gone five steps when the roof began to fall in. The tunnel shook, rumbling audibly through their suits, and cascades of dust, sand, pebbles and rocks spilled down from sudden cracks in the ceiling. "Run for it! Kirk yelled. And they ran. They pelted up the angled tunnel, scrambling over the rough floor, shouting information and yelling for help through the intercom, pushing and hauling and carrying the cumbersome crystal column, while the collapsing tunnel chased after them like hungrily closing jaws.

They were almost safe, almost within reach of the darker rock of the fall-clear zone, when the roof caught up to them. Spilling dunes of sand caught their feet, rocks hammered a hail of blows on their backs, and the chaotic grinding roar was everywhere. Someone screamed shrilly in the intercom. The crystal fought and bucked in Kirk's arms, caught on something, rolled him under, and jammed at an angle above him. He caught a glimpse of a glove flying past him, no longer attached to its suit, riding a jet of spattering red mist.



Then a sudden web cracked across his vision, a web centered with a tiny, but lethal, hole. Gale-force winds whistled through his helmet, dragging his head forward. The dust-filled outer vacuum pulled at him like some amorphous, invisible deep-space monster, sucking the flesh off his face and stabbing a tongue of searing cold into his left eye. He clawed at his face-plate, found the hole, pressed the heel of his hand against it with all the strength in his arm, while the hurricane in his helmet pushed back. Explosive decompression! was all he could think. He pressed his face-plate hard against the smooth bulk of the crystal column, using his pinned hand for an air-seal and his other arm to clamp him in place. Vast, hideous pain swept over his consciousness, dulling everything else - the frantic laboring of his lungs, the screams that rattled in his helmet, and the fragmented messages shouted through the still-operable suit's intercom.

Exactly 17 minutes later the rescue team phasered and dug and clawed its way through the rubble, and found Kirk still wrapped around the crystal. Sparks Vanderhoof took one brief look and didn't bother calling for an emergency patch-kit, but shouted the co-ordinates up to the Enterprise.

Commander Scott, working the transporter controls, gaped at the sight that materialized on the platform. There was Sparks, crouching on the pad with the Captain in his arms, and there were Ann Bailey and Christine Cahpel, holding between them the biggest chunk of raw dilithium crystal that Scott had ever seen in his life. He hurried onto the platform to help the women set down the crystal that was suddenly heavy in the ship's gravity. He was still staring at it when Nurse Chapel ran for the ship's intercom and called Sickbay. Scott turned around in time to see Sparks pull off the Captain's helmet, and he saw what lay under the cracked face-plate. Then he lost his lunch all over the transporter pad.

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They Told Me, "Cheer Up, Things Could Be Worse," So I Cheered Up, And Sure Enough, Things Got Worse

Project Tape R-99, Roantree recording.

THEY'VE PUT HIM IN MY OLD BED IN THE INTENSIVE-CARE UNIT. THE DOCTORS DIDN'T WANT ME TO SEE HIM, BUT I WENT IN AND LOOKED ANYWAY. GOOD THING QUANNA WAS WITH ME, OR I MIGHT NOT HAVE BEEN ABLE TO WALK BACK. LORD OF LIGHT, NOBODY WILL EVER CALL HIM PRETTY AGAIN! HE'LL LIVE, AND THERE WON'T BE MUCH BRAIN DAMAGE, AND HE STILL HAS THE OTHER EYE, AND THAT'S ABOUT ALL THEY CAN SAY FOR HIM. OH, MATERRA....

WELL, HE DIDN'T SPEND IT FOR NOTHING. SCOTTY SAYS THERE'S ENOUGH CRYSTAL IN THAT CHUNK HE BROUGHT BACK TO TAKE CARE OF THE ENTIRE SHIP, WITH A FULL SET OF SPARES. THE ENGINEERS ARE CUTTING AND REFINING THEM RIGHT NOW. THIS TIME TOMORROW, THE SHIP WILL BE UP TO FULL POWER. THE END'S IN SIGHT, BUT AT A VICIOUS COST. SHARON DIED IN THE CAVE-IN, AND DAVE WAS SO BADLY MANGLED THAT HE COULDN'T HAVE SURVIVED ANOTHER DAY. I HAD TO GO LOOK UP HIS DEATH-SONG IN SPARKS' RECORD TAPES, AND THE SINGING OF IT LEFT ME SO DEPRESSED THAT QUANNA AND SPARKS HAD TO STAY WITH ME ALL NIGHT.... "GLOOMY SUNDAY" - HELL OF A SONG. I NEVER WANT TO HEAR IT AGAIN.

BAILEY WENT BACK TO CAMP CLAVIUS. SHE AND JEAN BATTRE-LE-DIABLE ARE DOING THE CO-ORDINATING RIGHT NOW, AND IT DOESN'T MATTER IF THEY'RE POOR AT IT, SINCE EVERYBODY'S TAKING THE OPPORTUNITY TO LIE DOWN AND SLEEP. ABOUT ALL THEY HAVE TO DO IS MONITOR THE HYDRO-TANKS AND THE POWER HARDWARE. LET THE CREW REST, A WEEK AT LEAST. WE ALL NEED TIME TO RECOVER BEFORE WE STRIKE CAMP AND START ON THE JOURNEY BACK. IF WE HAVE ENOUGH TIME, I CAN GO OUT AND FULFILL MY PLEDGE TO THE VENTURE, AT LONG LAST...AFTER I SLEEP....

* * * * *

There was a silence, darkness, no pain, no thought - only timeless drifting on dark water. Sometimes the slow currents carried him near awareness of dim light and distant voices, but he had no desire to notice them, and in time the currents would carry him away again. Once he drew close enough to hear the voices clearly, a man's and a woman's, and even recognize the words.

"...no use, Christine. Further surgery would accomplish nothing. I simply cannot replace what's gone. Enough physical therapy can eventually overcome the brain damage, but we have no facilities for replacing his eye."

"Once we get to our own time-line...."

"Yes, it's possible that somewhere in the Federation someone has the technology for cloning a new eye, but we're a long way from there. Until that happens...well, I don't need to quote Starfleet regulations...."

"M'Benga, can't you get it through your head that there is no Starfleet here and now? There is nothing but ourselves, what we have, and what we need. What the Captain needs is to get back to his job as soon as possible. Take that away from him, and you'll kill him."

"Dammit, Nurse, a one-eyed man can't command a starship!"

"Why not? He has Sulu and Chekov to fly the ship for him, Scotty to work the engines for him, and Uhura to be the ship's eyes and ears for him. All he has to do is sit in the middle, keep track of everything and make decisions...to be Co-ordinator, as Roantree would say."

"Jenneth Roantree has two good eyes and an unscarred brain!"

"And she still can't command this ship! Nor could you, nor I, nor anyone we have left - except him! And he needs to do it!"

"Mr. Scott can manage it, or Sulu, if it comes to that. Can't you understand that there's a good solid reason for the regulation...."

Kirk didn't wait to hear any more. He didn't need to think to understand that there was pain and danger here; he knew that from the tone of the quarreling voices, and from his own gut-level reaction to the word "Starfleet regulations." He let the lightless sea carry him away again, back to silence and peace.

Eventually the light came back and refused to go away. Little by little he was washed up on the beach of awareness. One by one his senses reawakened, reminding him of who and where he was. Pulsing sound of indicators. Chemical smells. Numbness over distant pain...Sickbay. I must be in Sickbay. He tried to open his eyes but only one responded - and that one slowly. Soft-colored blurs resolved into the recognizable shapes of the intensive-care unit - and Christine Chapel starting up as she saw him waken. He turned his head toward her, feeling an unaccustomed stiffness, numbness, sheathing the left side of his face. Then he remembered.

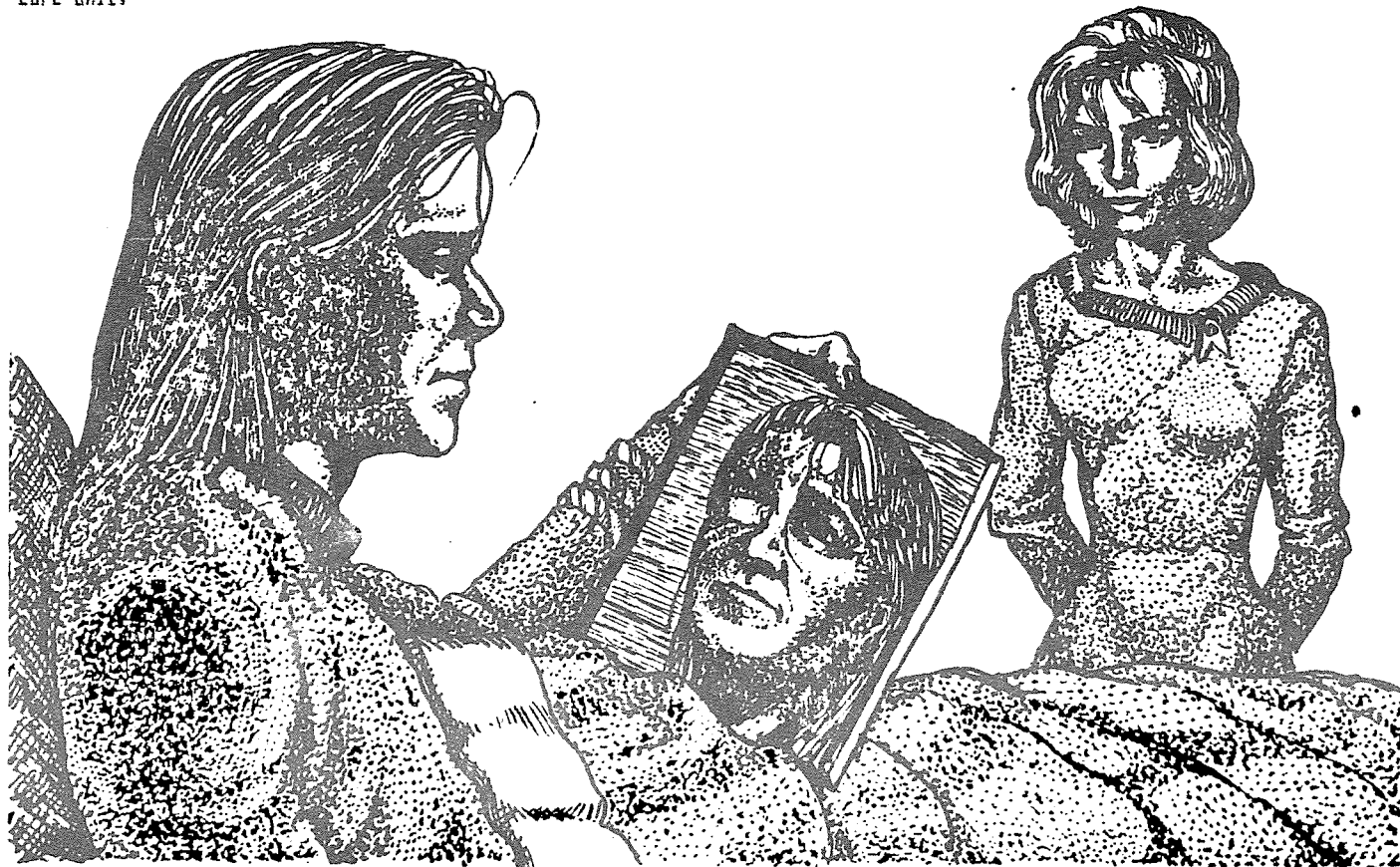
"Captain, I'm glad to see you awake!" Nurse Chapel bent over him, unmistakable joy and relief on her face. "Glad to have you back, Sir. You've been unconscious for days."

Kirk studied her, mildly surprised at her unfeigned concern, remembering the way she'd acted when he first beamed her up, and when he'd last seen her. Why the change? Is it only because now I'm.... "Christine...." He had trouble forming the syllables. "Please...get me...a mirror...."

Her face froze as she remembered, knowing that he remembered too, the last time he had said those words. With no further comment, she turned and got him the mirror. He tried to take it in his right hand, found the fingers numb and uncooperative, and took it with his left. Lifting it up to where he could look into it was one of the hardest things he'd ever done in his life.

The view was every bit as bad as he'd expected. He spent long minutes staring in sickened fascination at the wide gray streak stretching through his hair, the webwork of angry welts scars converging, like the rays of an impact-crater, on the neat oblong bandage that lay flat in the space where his left eye had been. "Right," he said grimly. "That's right..." There are no one-eyed starship Captains. I'm finished. He let the mirror drop. "You know... Chris..." he added mildly. "I'd... rather have... seen Janice Lester's face... this time..."

Christine Chapel did a most unprofessional thing. She pressed her knuckles against her mouth, and ran out of the intensive-care unit. It took her five minutes to climb back into her composure. It took another five minutes to realize that his last words had been noticeably clearer than the first. "All right," she whispered, grimly scrubbing the last tears out of her eyes. "Physical therapy starts tomorrow." Then she turned around and marched straight back into the intensive-care unit.



Project Tape R-101, Roantree recording.

OUR PEOPLE ARE BEGINNING TO COME UP FROM CLAVIUS, BRINGING THEIR GEAR WITH THEM, SETTLING BACK INTO THEIR OLD ROOMS. KIRK'S CREW IS BEHAVING RATHER ODDLY TOWARD US; THEY ACT AS IF THEY EXPECTED US TO GO BACK TO EARTH, MOVE IN WITH THE ENTERPRISE'S SETTLEMENT THERE, AND LEAVE THEM TO DO THE ACTUAL WORK OF SETTING TIME STRAIGHT. FAT CHANCE!

WE TALKED THAT OVER AT MEETING LAST NIGHT - THE FIRST ONE I'VE BEEN ABLE TO ATTEND SINCE I WAS INJURED AND SOME OF KIRK'S PEOPLE WHO WERE THERE SEEMED SOMEWHAT UPSET AT THE PROSPECT OF HAVING US COME WITH THEM. I THINK THEY'RE A LITTLE DISMAYED AT OUR COUNTRY-COUSIN MANNERS, EMBARRASSED AT HAVING US HAYSEEDS COME WITH THEM INTO THEIR CLEAN CIVILIZED TIME-LINE WITH OUR MANNERS AND MEMORIES INTACT. OR MAYBE THEY'RE WORRIED ABOUT THIS DOUBLE -IDENTITY BUSINESS, AFRAID OF HAVING PEOPLE DOUBLED.... OUR PEOPLE ARE BEGINNING TO WORRY ABOUT THE POSSIBILITY OF BEING MERGED WITH THEIR OTHER SELVES, AND I CAN'T BLAME THEM. I WOULDN'T WANT TO BE MERGED WITH KIRK, EVEN IF HE WEREN'T... MAIMED. I DON'T THINK HE'D WANT TO BE JOINED WITH ME, EITHER. SO THERE IT IS; WE ALL GO TOGETHER. WE'LL INTEGRATE WITH KIRK'S CREW, AND GO WITH HIM TO STOP PENNINGTON.

...PROVIDED KIRK COMES WITH US AT ALL. I'VE HEARD SOME DISTURBING RUMORS. HIS PEOPLE DON'T SEEM TO NOTICE QUANNECHOTA WHEN THEY'RE GOSSIPING OVER MEALS, AND THEY DON'T REALIZE THAT SHE HAS EXCELLENT HEARING. WHAT SHE OVERHEARD FROM AN ENGINEER IS THAT THEY'RE GOING TO TAKE THE SHIP AWAY FROM KIRK. THE REASON, AS NEAR AS SHE COULD TELL, IS THAT MISSING EYE. APPARENTLY, IN HIS TIME-LINE THE CO-ORDINATOR MUST BE A PILOT, AND A PILOT MUST HAVE TWO GOOD EYES - NO CROWN-OF-MIRRORS, OR ANY TRICKS LIKE THAT.

I SUPPOSE THIS MEANS THAT THE REST OF THE CREW WILL BUY OUT HIS SHARE OF THE SHIP AND MAKE HIM LEAVE, WHICH STRIKES ME AS DAMNED CRUEL, AS WELL AS UNNECESSARILY WASTEFUL. I DON'T CARE HOW FORMAL THESE PEOPLE ARE, IT'S OUTRAGEOUS TO THROW A MAN AWAY JUST BECAUSE HE CAN'T FILL ONE JOB. WHY CAN'T THEY GIVE HIM A DIFFERENT JOB ON THE SHIP AND LET HIM STAY? EVEN IF HE CAN'T PILOT, HE CAN STILL CO-ORDINATE. WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH THESE PEOPLE? BY THE MOTHER, I'LL HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT THIS! NOW THAT MY CREW'S STARTING TO COME UP, WE'LL ALL HAVE SOMETHING TO SAY ABOUT IT!

* * * * *

It was nothing but a small red rubber ball with a squeeze-buzzer inside it, a ball that squeaked when it was pressed hard enough. As a child, Kirk wouldn't have played with it for five minutes without becoming bored. Now he stared at it with the tight, furious concentration of a gunnery officer tracking a Klingon warship. The exercise was a simple one: repeat the sentence, look at the ball, squeeze until it squeaked. He'd been doing that, over and over, for more than an hour.

"The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog," he repeated slowly, carefully, hating every syllable in the idiot phrase. Now look at it. Focus. Squeeze. Watch the alignment of the fingers. The ball squeaked like an enraged tribble. Kirk decided that he hated tribbles.

The door whooshed open. With a speed and accuracy he couldn't have managed the day before, Kirk shoved the ball under his pillow.

"Hi, Kirk. How're you doing?" asked Sparks, ambling over to the side of the bed, Ann Bailey close behind him. "The doctors treating you all right?"

"Sure. I'm fine," Kirk lied, wondering who had let them in here and when they'd go away. "How are...you?"

"Fwwooh! Tired!" Sparks grinned, not seeming to notice how Kirk's voice stumbled. "Slept 14 hours and I'm still tired. We're starting up from Clavius, and shutting down the base is almost more hassle than putting it up. Poor Jean's bawling over having to leave his hydro-tanks. We finally worked out a set-up so the solar batteries will keep the damn hydrodomes warm when we leave, so the plants'll have a fighting chance. Hoo-hah! Next visitor to the moon's gonna wonder where all that jungle came from."

"Wait, wait, wait," Kirk struggled to keep up with him. "You're... coming up? Shutting down...the base? Why?"

"We don't need it anymore; the job's done." Ann Bailey smiled at him. "That crystal you brought up was more than enough for the whole ship."

"I....enough? Finished?" Then it's almost over. Scotty can take her back around the sun. Sulu can lead the Security team down to Chicago and stop Pennington. We'll come back to the right time-line, and everything will be over. I have no part in it anymore. Anticlimax. End as an observer. "Finished."

"Not exactly," Sparks chuckled, shaking his head like a cheerful black bear. "We've got a lot of mopping up to do here. Then we scoot back to Earth to check on the progress there. Then we go back in time and stop Ludd's daughter. Aw, it'll take a couple weeks, at least."

"More than that, probably," Bailey cut in. "They haven't finished refining the crystals yet, much less testing 'em. Scotty says there's some impurity that he's having a tough time getting out. No, we'll see that new universe no earlier than New Year's."

"It's..almost Christmas!" Kirk realized with a start. I'd lost track.... Well, Merry Christmas, James T.! Welcome home! You're grounded. You're maimed for life. You'll never see open space again. "...and a Happy New Year," he muttered.

The other two understood perfectly. Sparks and Bailey looked at him, then at each other, and wondered what in the world they could say that wouldn't hurt him. Sparks came up with an idea first, remembering something Roantree had told him. "Hey, Jim," he asked amiably, "how would you like to come to our Yule party?"

"Sure," said Kirk, not really caring. "Glad to." When will they go away?

The door whooshed open again and Jenneth Roantree walked in - moving carefully, limping a little, but still walking. Kirk watched as she moved in between the others and sat down on his bed, wearily hating her for her unmarked face and hair, her workable hands and voice, her unscarred brain and her two good eyes. She returned his look with a long, calm, thoughtful stare that made him want to squirm.

"I must say, Jim," she commented, sympathetically but totally without pity, "You really do look like hell."

"Thanks!" he said, surprised and almost amused by her blunt honesty. "You look...awful, too."

"Could be worse," she grinned. "We're lucky. People don't usually live through a suit rupture. We could be much uglier, and much deader."

"We can...start a club. Very exclusive," he managed, his face pulling into a faint, lopsided smile. It was a surprising relief to be able to talk this plainly about his pain. "What'll we...call it? The...'Blow Outs?'"

"Or maybe 'the Jet Set,'" she laughed. "But seriously, Jim, how soon can you be ready to work again?"

Kirk stared at her as if she'd gone completely out of her mind. "You crazy?" he managed to say. "Never! I'm finished. No damned use. They're going to...ground me...." On the words the pain soared, blinding and choking and utterly terrible. Its sole mercy was that it didn't last long.

A hand reached out of the haze and took hold of his arm. An urgent voice followed it. "Jim, that's just what I mean to prevent! They've no right to buy you out, put you off the ship; it's wasteful, as well as cruel. We mean to say that at your crew's meeting."

"Buy out...put off....? Huh?" Kirk struggled to make some sense out of all that. "What? You...what?"

"We've all talked about this," Roantree hurried on. "We don't see why you can't work some other job on the ship, something that doesn't take two eyes. Dammit, the whole ship's short on crew - they can't afford to throw anyone away, and we mean to make them see that. Now, just how badly are you injured, and what will it take to make you recover?"

"The eye, of course. Nothing they can...do about that...." Now that he stopped to think of it as a problem with a solution, the pain wasn't nearly as bad. "The rest.... Some brain damage. Chris says...I can recover, maybe...completely...in a few months. I need practice, intensive...retraining. Started already." There. I don't even sound that bad; just mildly drunk. There goes my image. Hah!

"A few months...." Roantree considered, frowning. "Jim, if you worked hard at it, if all of us helped you, do you think you could cut it down to a few weeks?"

"A few weeks?" Ridiculous! ...but what if....? "Why?"

"Strategy, Jim. It's going to take awhile for us to clean up and pull out of Camp Clavius. It's also going to take awhile for your engineers to finish making those crystals workable - some impurity in them, as I understand it. Altogether, your ship won't be going anywhere or doing anything for about two weeks, maybe more. It isn't likely that your crew will make a formal decision on you before then. The more you can recover in that time, the better your argument will be."

"Wait," Kirk gulped, realizing where this idea was going. "Look, Jen, no matter...what I do...I can't be Cap-...I won't be...Co-ordinator. That's hopeless. You should understand. Here, too, the 'Braider' has to...be a pilot. I can't do that...with one eye."

"No, I don't see that!" Roantree snapped at him. "Even with our technology that wasn't necessary. Between now and tomorrow, Sparks could rig up a special head-set for you that would compensate for a lot of what's missing. Your own people could probably do better, if they could be convinced. Dammit, in my country...."

"We're not in your country!" Can't you see that my crew would never stand for it? Damn you, stop taunting me with empty hopes!

"No, but we're not in yours, either," Roantree retorted. "We're in no-man's land, and we can make up our customs as we need them. We mean to have some say about what's done to you. Now, will you let us help you or not?"

"Oh, what the hell," Kirk sighed. You stubborn, bull-headed...like me. At least I might stop being so damned maddeningly helpless.... "All right. Go ahead. It can't hurt."

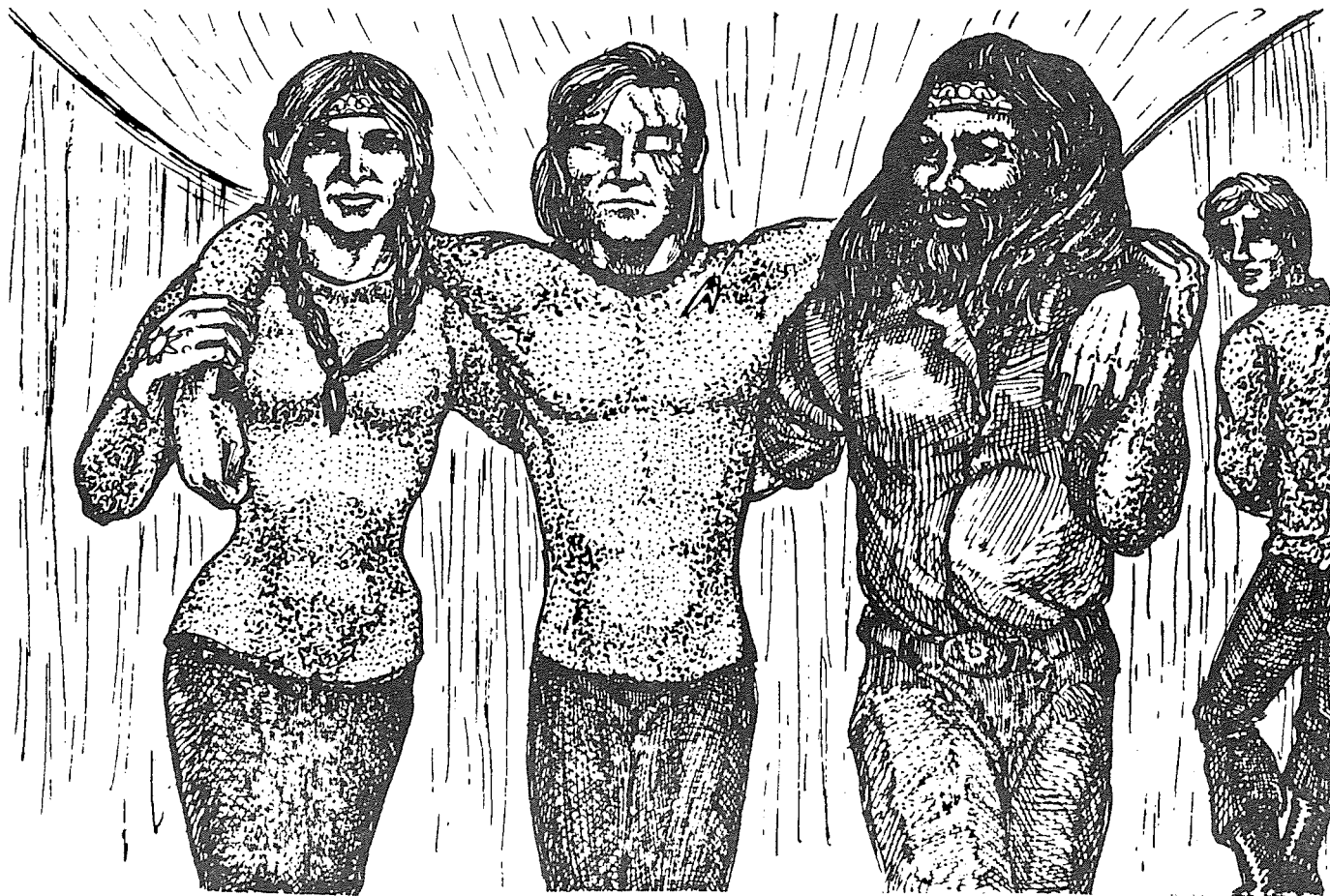
"Fine." Roantree's sunny grin re-emerged. "We'll go collar that nice sympathetic Nurse Chapel and talk to her about your retraining program. First problem: can you walk?"

"I don't know. Chris gave me...a leg-brace...to get used to. I was going to...start trying to...walk tomorrow."

"If you're willing to start tonight, we'll help you get out of here and down to your room. There's no real reason for you to stay here, and it would look good if you didn't. We'll help. Will you try?"

Kirk thought of the effort that would take, and he thought of the possibility of collapsing on his first step and hitting the deck, face first, in front of everybody. Then he thought of actually getting back to his own cabin, out of this all-too-public place. "I'll try," he agreed. "Help me up." As Roantree obligingly pulled the blankets down, he remembered to reach under the pillow for the red rubber ball.

The walk down the corridor was a long weary nightmare. His right leg felt like rubber, the knee refused to lock properly, the brace dragged painfully, and he had trouble feeling where the deck was. If Roantree and Sparks hadn't been holding him up on either side he would have fallen ten times in the first twenty steps. They moved patiently beside him, matching their pace to his, waiting as he dragged his sluggish leg forward, hitched the brace into position, placed his foot carefully, and slid his weight forward on the whole rickety assemblage, over and over. They neither flinched nor commented when the leg repeatedly collapsed, jarring his weight onto their shoulders. They didn't so much as turn their heads when his hand closed convulsively on the exercise ball and made it squeal. Step by step they helped him out of the room, past the astonished duty-nurse,



out of Sickbay, and down the corridor. Their steady patience let him forget everything else and concentrate on the subtle mechanics of walking. By the time they reached his cabin he'd begun to master the trick of keeping his leg straight, and collapsed at only one step in ten.

Inside the darkened cabin he stopped them and made them let him go. "Far enough," he said, leaning on the desk. "I can...manage from here."

Sparks and Roantree obligingly stepped away from him. "Goodnight then," said Roantree as she turned toward the door. "Be careful how you land."

Kirk thought that over as the door closed behind the Anarchists. With luck I won't land, he thought grimly, sliding his recalcitrant leg forward. Three steps around the desk. I can lean on it that far. He inched his way around the desk, concentrating on each separate movement in the sequence. It took him five minutes, and the effort left him sweating. The open space between the desk with the dividing screen loomed as wide as the Gobi Desert. He measured the distance with his eyes, gritted his teeth, and started across. Pull...set foot...straighten...shift weight. Careful, careful....

On the third step his knee didn't lock properly, and his nerves didn't warn him sufficiently, and when he shifted his weight, his leg folded and dropped him all the way to the deck. The squeaking of the blindly-clutched ball added a final garnishing touch of insult. Kirk lay on his back and swore at the ceiling until he ran out of oaths. Why is it, he wondered miserably, pressing his good arm across his face, that I can swear so easily when it's so hard to talk?

Soft footsteps padded toward him across the carpet. Kirk went rigid, horrified that someone had seen him like this. He pulled his arm away from his eyes and looked up into the calm face of Quannechota.

"Can you get up without help?" she asked.

Kirk felt his insubordinate leg, and knew that he couldn't. "Not yet," he said. Maybe not for weeks.... The despair was hard to fight down.

Quannechota took him by the arm and dragged him the last few steps to the screen. He reached out, dug his fingers into the metal mesh, and levered himself up on his good leg. Quannechota held his other arm, giving no more help than necessary, making him rely on his legs and his grip on the screen to haul himself upright. He understood, and was grateful in spite of his fatigue. She paused only to take the exercise ball from his hand, then went back to the sleeping-area, sat down on the bed, and calmly began taking off her clothes.

Kirk clung to the screen and watched her. Is that supposed to be some kind of an incentive? he wondered. You must be kidding! All I can do in that bed is lie down and sleep. He looked away from the gleaming lamp of her bared skin, and concentrated on the grim pattern of walking. He managed to cross the last three steps to the bed, and then let himself fall into it. He couldn't remember when he'd been so tired.

Quannechota wordlessly undressed him, stopped to put the ball back in his hand, and began rubbing him down. All along his right side her hands felt vague and distant, and he could take no comfort from them. He tried to concentrate on the sensations, remembering how they ought to feel, but his attention fragmented under his monumental weariness. He couldn't even take a viewer's interest in her bare body; it might as well have been a statue in a museum for all it interested him. I'm no good to you, either, he thought. Sleep offered a tempting haven. His last conscious act was to shove the rubber exercise ball under his pillow, where he could find it easily in the morning.

* * * * *

Captain's Log, Stardate 6112.4.

TESTING. TESTING. ONE, TWO, THREE. THE QUICK BROWN FOX JUMPED OVER THE LAZY DOG. SHE SELLS SEA-SHELLS BY THE SEASHORE. ALL RIGHT. I CAN TALK. IF I SPEAK SLOWLY, THINK CAREFULLY ABOUT WHAT I'M DOING, I SOUND NORMAL. IF I FORGET, TRY TO TALK NORMALLY, I SOUND DRUNK. IT'S NOT AS BAD AS IT WAS, THOUGH. MY HAND'S RECOVERING; I CAN SIGN MY NAME LEGIBLY. I CAN WALK RELIABLY WITHOUT HELP, SO LONG AS I WEAR THE BRACE, BUT I LIMP. CHRISTINE'S DELIGHTED BY MY PROGRESS. I'M NOT. GOD, SO FAR TO GO! AND THIS DAMNED GLASS MARBLE IN MY EYE-SOCKET GIVES ME HEADACHES, AND M'BENGA COULDN'T CLEAN UP ALL THE SCARS, AND I CAN'T DO ANYTHING WITH QUANNA, AND NOTHING WILL EVER MAKE ME CAPTAIN OF THE ENTERPRISE AGAIN...DELETE THAT. NO SELF-PITY. NOT FOR ME.

I CAN FEEL THE CREW WAITING, WATCHING ME, TRYING TO PUT OFF THE DECISION BUT KNOWING IT HAS TO COME. THE ANARCHISTS ARE WITH ME NIGHT AND DAY, HELPING ME THROUGH THE EXERCISES, WORKING ME OVER WITH RUBDOWNS, KEEPING MY BED WARM, ACTING LIKE A PERSONAL BODYGUARD, GIVING THE CREW DEFIANT LOOKS...IT'S ALMOST FUNNY. THE ANARCHISTS ACCEPT ME: MY OWN CREW DOESN'T. NO REAL HOSTILITIES YET BETWEEN THE TWO CAMPS, AND I MUSTN'T LET ANY DEVELOP. I'VE GOT TO RECOVER, AND FAST. IT'S THE ONLY THING I CAN DO.

* * * * *

Kirk trotted his third lap around the gym, Sparks and Roantree pacing him to either side. His right leg no longer folded at odd moments, but it didn't move well either; too stiff, slow and springless. He concentrated on pushing off extra hard from it, fighting against the added weight of the brace, which added a jolting motion to his gait. Must look like hell, he thought.

"You know, Jim," Roantree panted as they puffed to a stop, "With Yule coming up soon, you'd best start learning the dance steps. How about trying that next?"

"Dance steps...." Kirk boggled at that as he towelled off. "Are you kidding? I couldn't manage the... Northern Reel in a leg-brace."

"It's not the Reel, but the Sun-Snake," Roantree replied. "That's sort of a cross between the Miserlou and a slow Hora. It's not hard. You'll manage. We've got five days; you can learn in that time."

"Five days? Is Christmas that close? I must have lost some time."

"Not Christmas; Yule," Sparks corrected, looking a bit uncomfortable. "That's the winter Solstice - the 21st."

"Oh." Of course. They're sun-worshippers, remember. It's probably an important religious festival. "That doesn't give me much time. Maybe I'd better not...."

"Old Doc Carson had a wooden leg," Roantree reflected. "That didn't stop him from dancing at Yule. Arthritis didn't stop old Mama Przyblyski, either. Believe me, Jim, once Yule gets started, nobody cares what you look like. Quit worrying."

"All right," Kirk smiled. "I'll risk it." You'll make an Anarchist of me yet!

A motion off his left side caught his attention. He had to turn his head to see that it was Chekov coming toward him, looking distressed and nervous. "Sair," Chekov said, "You're wanted in the conference room. The senior staff is waiting for you."

Kirk guessed why Chekov had bothered to deliver the message personally, instead of calling through the intercom. No ordinary meeting. "I'll be right there," he replied, taking care to speak clearly.

Roantree held out his shirt to him, and Sparks stepped up beside him. The implications of this visit hadn't been lost on them either. As Kirk left the gym they fell into step beside him, Sparks pausing only to go to a wall-communicator and call Ann Bailey. They're inviting themselves in, Kirk thought, feeling sweat start again between his shoulder-blades. Lord, don't let the crew try to refuse them. Don't let it come to an open breach! He couldn't help noticing, as if it were for the first time, that the Anarchists clanked and jingled as they walked. How much concealed armament are they carrying, anyway?

They entered the conference room to find Scott, Sulu, M'Benga, Nurse Chapel and Uhura already there. So was Quannechota, sitting a little to one side, firmly ensconced behind the computer tie-in. Kirk carefully sat down beside her and the Anarchists took places on his side of the table. Chekov huddled in a neutral corner. For a moment nobody spoke. Kirk felt their eyes on him, and was glumly aware of what they were seeing - the wide gray streak in the nearly shoulder-length hair, the black patch mercifully hiding his blank glass eye, the pale sunburst of white scars radiating from that black center, the thinned-out body and the braced leg. No, not the Captain you knew, am I? he thought. "Well, people, let's get on with it."

"Agreed," said Quannechota. She pushed a button on the viewing console, with the faintest of flourishes, and Kirk realized that she'd opened the all-ship frequency. So did everyone else. Uhura started forward, then caught herself and leaned back, turning to look at the rest of the Enterprise's officers. Scott and Nurse Chapel looked at each other. Sulu and Chekov looked down at their hands. M'Benga looked miserable. The Anarchists didn't turn a hair. Nobody said anything. Round one to us, Kirk thought. All the Anarchists on the ship, and maybe on the ground, get to listen in... But then, so does the rest of my crew...."

"Weel," Scott began picking up a sheaf of notes, "the first problem is the crystals. We've enough and more than enough, but they're no' the best quality ta be had. They've impurities in 'em that we canna refine out, and I know, because I've tried everything. They're adequate for most purposes, but they'll no' take us ta Warp 8. We canna go back in time by takin' the ship aroon' the sun. Neither can we do it by accelerated cold-startin' o' the engines. The crystals'll no' stand the strain."

"Then we're still trapped here?" Kirk whispered. "It was all...for nothing?"

"No, no, Sir!" Scott insisted hastily. "I didna say that! There's a third way ta travel in time, if ye'll recall, and noo we have the crystals ta take us there. Aye, that much they'll do."

"We are referring to the Guardian of Forever," Quannechota explained.

Kirk felt the hair lift on his scalp. "That's...way out at the edge of the galaxy," he said. "It'll take us weeks, maybe months...and God only knows what the galaxy's like, now. The Romulans could be there, or the Klingons, or who knows what. Scotty, you're sure there's no other way?" As Scott shook his head, Kirk remem-

bered another problem. "Even if we can get there, it might be no good. Remember, the reason we...went around the sun, that first time, was that the Guardian wouldn't focus on...that place and time."

"That was in your time-line," Quannechota reminded him. "It may go otherwise in this one, as it was with the crystals. If so, we shall go to 1990 and stop Judas Pennington. If not, we shall go to the people of Tycho Base in 2012, and warn them of what awaits them, and give them phasers also. If all else fails, we may at least reach another planet where there are better crystals to be had; from there, we can return home and go around the sun."

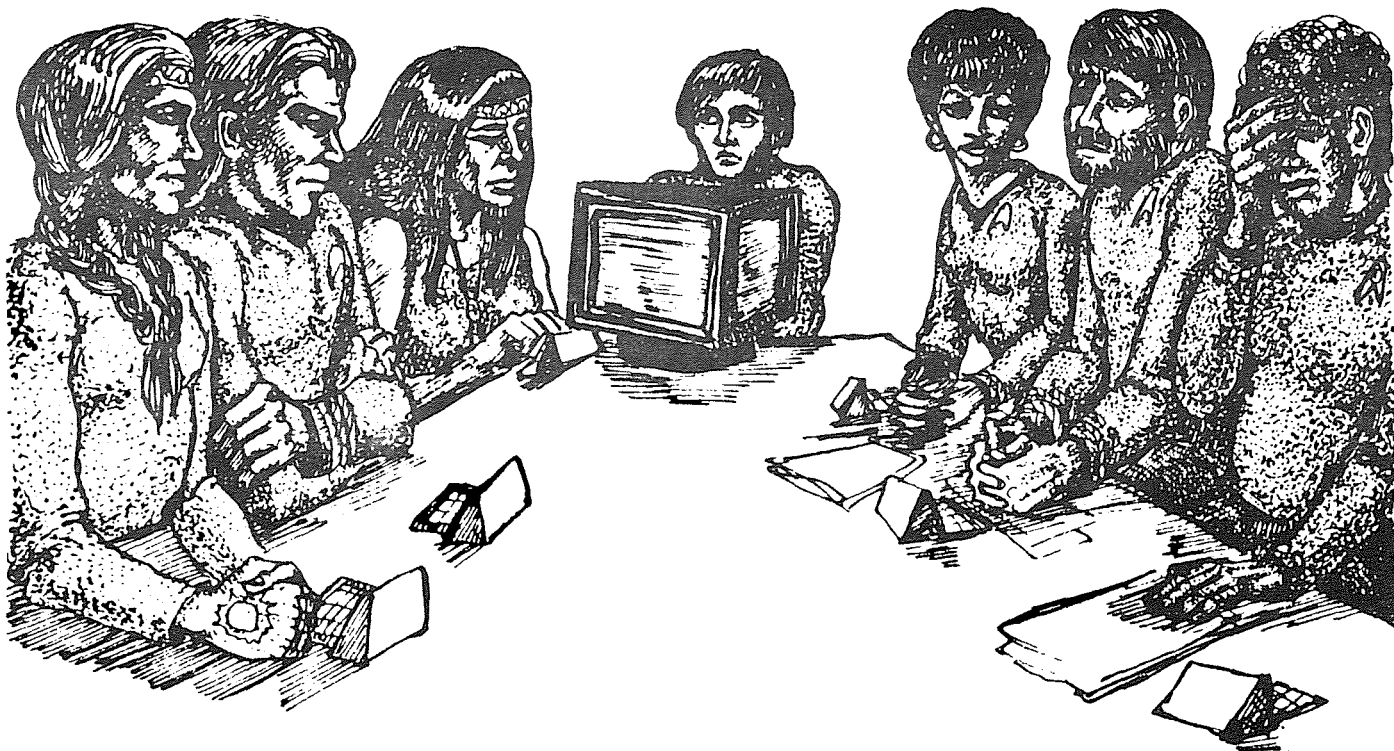
"We can't do anything but try," Kirk agreed. "Very well. We'll set a course for the Guardian's planet as soon as everyone's aboard. Is Camp Clavius completely evacuated? Has anyone contacted the crew's colony, or the emigrants?"

"The evacuation will be completed by noon tomorrow," Quannechota replied. "We have lost contact with the High Harbor emigration - apparently the long-range transmitter was lost during a storm on the lake. We must attempt to reach them when we resume orbit around Earth. The crew's settlement reports that the emigrants have not signalled them recently, and...." The pause was brief, but ominous. "They indicate no desire to accompany the ship on the long voyage to the Guardian."

"So they still won't come back." They still won't trust me. "We can make do with what we have. It's just as well, I suppose...that the High Harbor people should find someone to...welcome them when they arrive. We'll have to talk to the Cannibal Wheel...see if she has supplies enough to last while we go off to the Guardian. If there's no further business, people...." He started to rise, hoping he could get away with it.

"There is some further business," M'Benga announced reluctantly. "There is the matter of the competency hearing."

Kirk sat back down with a sinking feeling. Nurse Chapel and Chekov threw M'Benga barely-hidden glares. Scott, Sulu and Uhura managed to look elsewhere. Roantree, Sparks and Bailey hitched themselves a little closer to Kirk. Quannechota studied everyone's reactions, paused a moment to evaluate, and then - unseen by anyone but Kirk - quickly switched off the intercom. Right then, Kirk knew he had lost. It's all over but the shouting, he thought. I can let go. He leaned back and let the words drift past him.



"...physical condition," M'Benga was saying. "Difficult to tell how much nervous tissue merely stunned and how much was actually damaged, and there is no way around the problem of that missing eye."

"But, dammit," Roantree cut in, "There are ways around that one-eye problem! We could make a headset for him - a Crown-of-Mirrors - that would reflect images to where his right eye can see them. It's been done before, and done well. I've seen it."

"Lass, lass," Scotty reproved gently. "That might be possible on a ship like the Sunfire, where ye've only the one console and perhaps a porthole ta look at, but 'tisna so on a ship as complex as the Enterprise. There's the whole bridge ta manage, all the sub-screens ta keep track of. It's just too much ta see at once; ye canna drive a starship wi' one e'e."

"But with all the people you have on the bridge, is it really necessary for the Co-ordinator to be the pilot, too?" Roantree insisted.

"No, it isn't!" Chekov almost cried. "He has me and Sulu to do that for him. Why else does the ship hef a separate Nefigator and Helmsman?" He stared defiantly around the conference room, surprised to see the Anarchists toss him fleeting smiles.

"It isn't just piloting," Sulu answered reluctantly. "Actually, it's easier to keep track of the helm and navigation consoles than the whole bridge. Mr. Scott's right; there's just too much to see."

"But how much you can see is such a small part of being Co-ordinator!" Roantree hung on like a bulldog. "It's the other skills that are important, and he still has those."

"No, me may not." M'Benga brought out his last argument, wishing miserably that he didn't have to. "I don't want to sound like the villain of the piece, but I must call to your attention certain physiological facts. The left hemisphere of the brain, which is where the damage has been done, is the site of analytical and decision-making facilities as well as the speech center."

' Kirk closed his remaining eye and turned very cold.

"Explain," Roantree demanded.

"To put it simply, the Cap...the subject may no longer have the ability to analyze situations clearly and make quick decisions. Such ability as he now has may fail him in a crisis, and we cannot afford to wait and see if this is likely to happen. I'm sorry, but we can no longer trust his skill."

There was silence for a moment as the Anarchists thought that over.

I mustn't let them keep arguing, Kirk thought. Someone will blunder, refer to 'Starfleet regulations' or something similar, and then the Anarchists will know the whole story, and the game will be over - perhaps in bloodshed. I can prevent that, if nothing else. "You've convinced me," he said, sliding carefully out of his chair. "That leaves you in charge, Mr. Scott. Take good care of the ship." He turned his back on the astonished Anarchists and marched out of the room, being very careful not to limp any more than absolutely necessary."

"Now look what you've done!" Roantree was the first to recover her voice. "By all the gods that ever were, if you wanted to break him completely, you couldn't have done a better job! Bad enough that you're bound and determined to buy out his share and put him off the ship - but did you have to call him a mental basket-case too? I've never seen such cruelty, not even from Luddites!"

"Wait," Uhura cut in. "What do you mean, 'buy him out?'"

Roantree explained. It took several minutes for the Enterprise officers to understand what she meant, and several minutes more to convince her that they had no such intentions.

"Ma God, lass," Scott fumed, "What did ye think we'd do, put him oot the airlock? What kind o' bastards do ye think we are?" Roantree gave him an odd look, and he hurried on before she could answer. "All we intend is ta...well, gi' him some other job." The bridge crew turned to stare at him. "As ye said, we're short on crew and there's much work ta runnin' a starship, and surely there's somethin' he can manage...perhaps, ah, in ma own department! Aye, after all, if I'm ta be up here watchin' the bridge, who's ta be doon in Engineerin' watchin' ma engines?"

"I'd like to help do that," Bailey spoke up. "I never did get to learn enough about those things. If he'll take me on as apprentice, I'll be glad to do the heavy work."

"Uh, certainly..." Scott capitulated, boggling somewhat at the idea of this gray-haired old woman working as a third-class oiler among his engines. "Aye, he shouldna exert himself too much in his condition. Nae doubt he'll be glad ta have ye aboot." Oh my God in heaven! A barbarian granny and a half-mad cripple, in charge of my engines! I'd best warn the Black Gang what to expect....

"That may do until we get to your time-line," Roantree refused to be mollified, still angry that Kirk had been beaten into giving up while she was still willing to fight for him. "But once we reach Para...er, the Parallel Country, what then? He said you were going to ground him. Will you put him off the ship then? Throw him away as if he were useless? Dammit, even among the Luddites, people don't call someone useless until he's all used up!"

"Oh no, nothing like that!" M'Benga interceded hastily, wrenching his mind away from the perfectly horrible image that her words conjured up. "Why, once we're back in the Fed...ah, the well-fed part of our time-line, we might be able to restore him to full health. Yes, ah...." He scrambled for ideas, ignoring Nurse Chapel's open-mouthed stare. "Yes, there are several races in our time-line that are, er, quite advanced in the biological sciences. No doubt, one of them will be able to...ah, replace - perhaps by cloning - make a new eye for him! Even if that's not possible, I'm sure some of our better engineers could build a...some sort of a sensing device for him, just as good as the original eye, if not better." He shot a glance of silent appeal to Scott.

"Huh? Oh. Aye, certainly," Scott agreed, beginning to sweat under his collar. "We can start doin' the research right noo. So there, lass; there's naethin' ta worry aboot. He'll be fine, fine...."

"Have you told him all these things?" Roantree asked, her gaze growing oddly distant.

"Er, no. There hasna been...ah, time for it."

"Then you'd better go tell him now, and quickly, before he does something irrevocable." Her face tightened in anger as she saw Scott continue to sit where he was, giving her a look of shocked disbelief. "Dammit, I know what I'm talking about! Can't you understand how deeply he's wounded? I tell you, I know what he's feeling - I have some of the Gift, and we're closer than twins - and you've pushed him into despair as deep as the bottom of the sea. Go help him now, and quickly, before you come too late! Move! Mach schnell!"

Flogged by relief at the chance of escaping her, and by fear that she just might be right, Scott got up and fled. In his haste, he forgot to appoint someone Acting-Captain in his absence.

Quannechota, unruffled as ever, looked around at the depleted assembly and calmly played her long-held trump card. "To move on to other business: now that we are preparing for a long interstellar journey, there is the question of work-division. As we are now without a ship, and your ship is seriously understaffed, it is only sensible to merge crews. It would save time if our people became apprentices and yours teachers in those areas where they are most knowledgeable. Thus, your knowledge in exchange for our work - is this an equitable trade?"

There was a long moment's silence as it dawned on the Enterprise's officers that Scott had departed without leaving anyone officially in charge. There was no one who could gracefully refuse the offer, or answer Quannechota's question, or think of a way to make these horrifying people quietly go away. They couldn't even discuss who should be in charge of the meeting without giving the game away, and nobody knew what the Anarchists might do then. There were, after all, more than 40 of them - all listening in, all armed, and all weird fanatics.

Blackmailed! thought Uhura, wearily resting her forehead against her hands. We're being blackmailed by a gang of innocent savages! We can't get rid of them. We've got to take them with us, teach them our sciences, conform to their customs - Oh, Djamballa!

"Since there are no objections," Roantree interjected into the awkward silence, "Please make your computer show everybody a diagram of how your work-crews are organized, so we can see where to fit our people in. Make sure that everyone on the ship can see it."

Quannechota surreptitiously punched the ship's intercom back on, then obligingly turned over her seat to Uhura. Uhura, carefully keeping her face blank, put the ship's table of organization on the all-ship video channel.

As quietly as that, Jenneth Roantree became, in effect, Temporary Acting-Captain of the Enterprise.

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Captain's Log, Supplemental

I, JAMES T. KIRK, BEING OF UNSOUND BODY AND PROBABLY UNSOUND MIND, HEREBY MAKE THIS LAST WILL AND TESTAMENT, NOT BECAUSE I EXPECT IT TO CARRY ANY LEGAL WEIGHT, BUT BECAUSE I MADE MY LAST WILL IN ANOTHER TIME-LINE, AND THINGS HAVE CHANGED CONSIDERABLY SINCE THEN.

I LEAVE MY SHIP TO SCOTTY, IN THE HOPE THAT HE'LL TAKE GOOD CARE OF HER, LOVE HER WELL, AND SOMEHOW GET HER HOME. I LEAVE MY PERSONAL EFFECTS TO JENNETH ROANTREE, FOR HER EDIFICATION AND PROBABLY AMUSEMENT. I LEAVE ANY WEALTH I MAY HAVE HERE TO QUANNECHOTA TWO-FEATHERS, FOR THE SUPPORT OF HER CHILD AND MINE. I COMMEND MY SPIRIT TO WHATEVER GODS WILL TAKE IT, MY LOVE TO DR. LEOANRD MCCOY AND SPOCK OF VULCAN, IN WHATEVER UNIVERSE I MAY FIND THEM, AND MY NOW-WORTHLESS CARCASS TO THE SOIL-BUILDING DOME OF CAMP CLAVIUS. MAYBE SOMEDAY A TREE WILL GROW WHERE MY HEART WAS.

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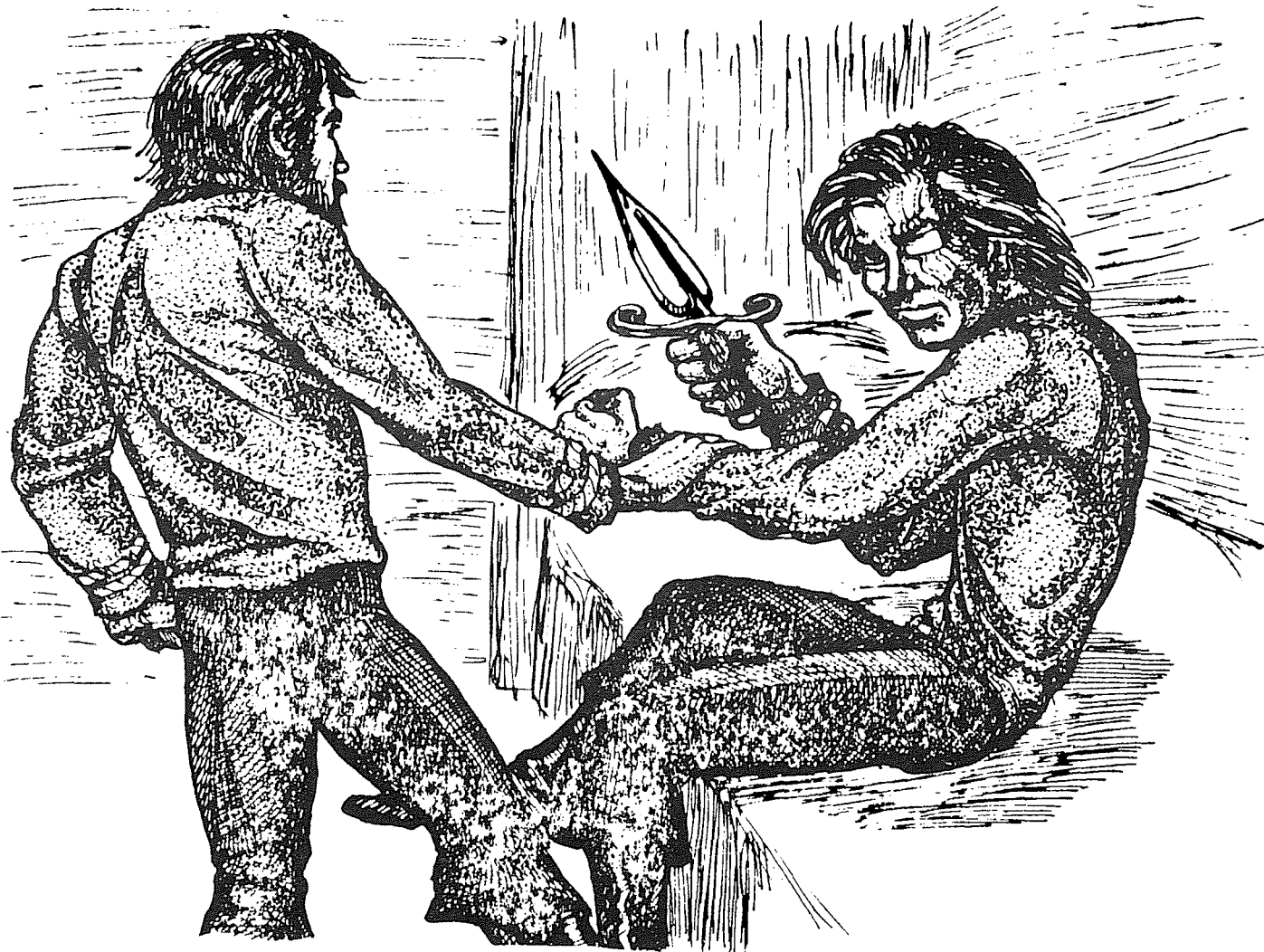
He's got to be in his cabin, Scott thought as he ran down the corridor. Life-support's shut down on most decks; where else could he go without being seen? Besides, a wounded beast heads for its own lair.... He reached Kirk's cabin and found the door locked. Proof positive! He's there! Scott groped for the small tool kit he always carried under his uniform shirt, and dug out a small magnetic key. It took him less than two seconds to get the door open.

A quick glance registered a darkened, empty office, but there was a dim light in the sleeping quarters. Scott sneaked toward it, holding his breath. His heart turned over and sank as he saw through the screen that the Captain was there, and sitting much too still - and then it threatened to jump right out of his chest as he sidled around the screen and got a good look at what the Captain was doing.

Kirk was sitting on the edge of his bed, his blind eye toward Scott, studying a long Andorian dagger that he'd bought on shore leave years before. His eye was fixed on the jewelled pommel, and his hands were closed firmly around the intricately-carved grip. The needle-sharp point rested against the base of his throat, between the ends of his collar-bones, and it had already broken the skin. As Scott watched, a narrow trickle of blood spilled slowly down Kirk's chest to blot itself brightly in the dull gold of his uniform shirt.

My, God, he's doing it! Scott thought, as he jumped forward. He grabbed Kirk's wrist with all his strength, pulling it back from the waiting target. "No!" he shouted. "Dammit, gi' me thot knife!"

Kirk turned his good eye on Scott, and it blazed with an expression that the Engineer didn't care to read. He didn't let go of the dagger, but reversed it smoothly in his free hand. Scott found himself looking down the blade from the wrong end. He let go of Kirk's wrist and stumbled backwards, thinking inanely: Wrong thing to say. He's past taking anyone's orders. "Captain," he gulped, "ye canna do this!"



"I'm not...Captain anymore." Kirk didn't bother to keep his voice clear. "I'm...incapable...of judgment. Remember?"

"But...." Try rousing pity. "Ye canna leave us like this! Think how the crew would feel if ye abandoned 'em...." Oh, stupid! Stupid choice of words!

"Which of them...thought about my feelings...when they abandoned me?" Kirk gave a laugh that made Scott's hair stand on end. "Turn-about's fair play, Scotty.... Let them try...soul-crushing guilt...for a change."

"I mean...." God, what can I say? What was it Roantree said? Tell him.... "Dammit, Sir, we need ye! We're shorthanded! Who's goin' ta watch the engines while I'm on the bridge?"

"Huh?" Kirk stared at him, the dagger momentarily forgotten. "You want me to...take charge of...Engineering? Me?"

That's it! Keep at it! "Aye, Sir. Someone's got ta do it, and ye're the one who knows the ship nearly as well as maself. Ye'll have thot great thwackin' Anarchist woman for an orderly, so ye won't risk harmin' yerself wi' heavy labor, and ye can concentrate on keeping track o' ma Black Gang for me. Come, Sir, who's there ta do it but yerself? ...noo, put thot knife away."

Kirk wavered, then pulled back. "No, I can't do that. 'Possible damage...inability to analyze, make decisions....' No, you can't trust the ship to me." His gaze returned to the dagger. "I'm useless."

"No, no, Sir," Scott carefully sat down beside him, keeping within grabbing-range of that knife. "Ye misunderstood the mon. What he said was there's a chance yer ability might leave ye if ye were put under stress,

and ye know what kind o' stress command puts ye under! Ther'll be no' much o' thot in Engineerin'; 'tis work ye can safely manage, and it's needed, and it'll gi' ye time ta finish recoverin' yer strength. Will ye do it, Sir? If no' for the crew, then for me?" Och, shameless sentiment - but any port in a storm!

"Perhaps...." Kirk murmured, lowering the dagger by a fraction of an inch.

"And there's others need ye too." That works. Punch yon sentimentality button again. "Little Chekov, noo; he'd go back ta drink in short order if ye left us. And what about yon Indian lass wha's carryin' yer child?"

"How did you know about that?" Kirk sat up, his lone eye blazing.

"Er, from Dr. M'Benga." Scott blushed fiercely. "I had a talk wi' him before I'd agree ta the hearin'."

"Oh God, it's probably all over the ship by now!" Kirk distractedly rubbed his forehead. "I bet they're all laughing. Consolation prize! I've lost the ship, but I've got a family. I can't be Captain, but I can, still...." No, I can't. I'm useless to Quanna, too. "Oh hell! The child was all she wanted. She's got a family already. She can...get along fine without me." Miramanee, this time it's only me that dies.... He looked back at the dagger.

"But there's sa many more wha depend on ye," Scott insisted. Inspiration swooped on him. "The whole universe waits! Don't ye realize, Sir, that ye're the only mon wha knows exactly what happened in Chicago in 1990? We won't know how ta set things right - it'll be all for naethin' - unless ye lay it oot for us what ta do, where ta catch Pennington and all...." Another idea scrambled on the heels of the last. "Ye know, ye'll have ta be on the landin' party that goes through the Guardian. We'll no' catch 'em if ye don't come wi' us."

"You want me...on the landing party?" Kirk thought about that, letting the dagger droop lower and lower. "I can...detail what happened, consolidate the logs, pinpoint the exact time for us to stop her...." He frowned, considering the strange logistics of time. "Scotty, what happens after that? If we stop Pennington, if we warn our...earlier selves about the People for Temporal Control agents, if we prevent all this...what will that do to us? We won't have...lived through this...season in hell. It will never have happened. What will...become of us?"

"'Tis hard ta tell, Sir, especially since we'll be goin' through the Guardian, which no one truly understands...." A weird and marvelous idea began to take form. "Do ye realize, Sir, that we might be restored ta oor former state? Ye might become what ye were - two good e'ies and no scars, and...and...." He clutched at Kirk's arm. "And if we warn 'em early enough, Dr. McCoy and Mr. Spock might still be alive! They'll no' have died!"

"Alive!" Kirk dropped the dagger. "My dead can live again.... If I take Quanna with me, I can have them all...I can get it all back! Everything!"

"Aye, Sir." Scott sagged with a vast relief. "Ye might well come oot o' the Guardian ta find yer old friends waitin' for ye. Ye mustna dissappoint 'em. Noo gi' me yon knife, an' dinna try any more such foolishness." He swept the dagger off the floor and stuffed it safely in his belt.

"Spock, alive...." Kirk repeated softly, falling back on the bed as if flattened by the idea. "Bones, as he was. Myself, as I was. And even... Scotty, I'm going to have to think about this."

"Plenty o' time for thot, Sir." Scott eased off the bed and moved toward the door. He was shaking with reaction, and wanted desperately to go back to his quarters and lie down. "Ger yerself some sleep, noo. We've much ta do tomorra."

"Yes, Tomorrow...." Kirk didn't even watch him go. He didn't notice the small commotion at the door as Scott, hurrying out, bumped smack into Quannechota coming in. He didn't realize that Quannechota was in the room with him until she sat down beside him and began peeling off his uniform. "Quanna," he whispered, smiling up at her, "would you mind if I called you Miramanee?"

"You may call me anything that is not insulting," she said, stripping off the last of his clothing and starting on her own. "Only remember that my true name is Quannechota."

"In this time-line, anyway," he acquiesced, pulling himself up toward the pillows. "You may change your name...on the other side of time...." He relaxed automatically as her fingers skimmed over his face and began rubbing the kinks out of his neck, let himself sink into the comforting rhythm of her hands and the oddly-soothing monotonous tune she was humming, let his mind drift on a sea of bright possibilities. I can have them back; I can get it all back. The thoughts slipped into a repetitive chant that matched the rhythm of Quannechota's hands and voice. His pulse fell into cadence with it, then surged ahead, quickened and burned. It took him several minutes to realize what was happening. My Lord, I'm getting that back, already! He looked up to see Quannechota staring bemusedly down at his body, and he laughed delightedly, and reached up and pulled her down into his arms.

* * * * *

Project Tape R-115, Roantree recording.

ALL'S WELL AND PROCEEDING SMOOTHLY. SCOTTY MANAGED TO TALK JIM OUT OF HIS SUICIDAL DEPRESSION, AND QUANNA SAYS HE'S RECOVERING WELL. OUR CREW'S BLENDED IN NOW WITH JIM'S PEOPLE AND ARE BUSY LEARNING THEIR NEW JOBS. SPARKS AND JEAN BATTRE-LE-DIABLE ARE BRINGING UP THE LAST PEOPLE AND EQUIPMENT THIS MORNING; THEY SHOULD BE FINISHED BY NOON, WHICH WILL GIVE ME TIME TO SLIP OFF AND DO THAT LAST JOB. IF ANYONE NEEDS ME, I'LL BE IN THE MARE IMBRIUM ALL MORNING.

* * * * *

Kirk finished his fifth lap around the gym and glanced at the chronometer for the third time. It was no use; time was still crawling, and there were three hours to go before his shift in Engineering started. Damn, M'Benga, he fumed for the dozenth time. When is he going to put me on a full shift, instead of this part-time nonsense? The inactivity's going to drive me up a bulkhead.

Ann Bailey came up to him with a towel. "Some more of our people will be here soon," she said. "Do you want to keep running and swinging on things, or would you rather learn the Sun-Snake for Solstice? It's only four days away, now."

"I thought Jenneth was going to teach me that." He noticed as he rubbed that there was more feeling now on the left side of his face. "Where is she, anyway?"

Bailey glanced about to see if Nurse Chapel was within hearing distance. "On the moon," she said quietly, "conducting a funeral."

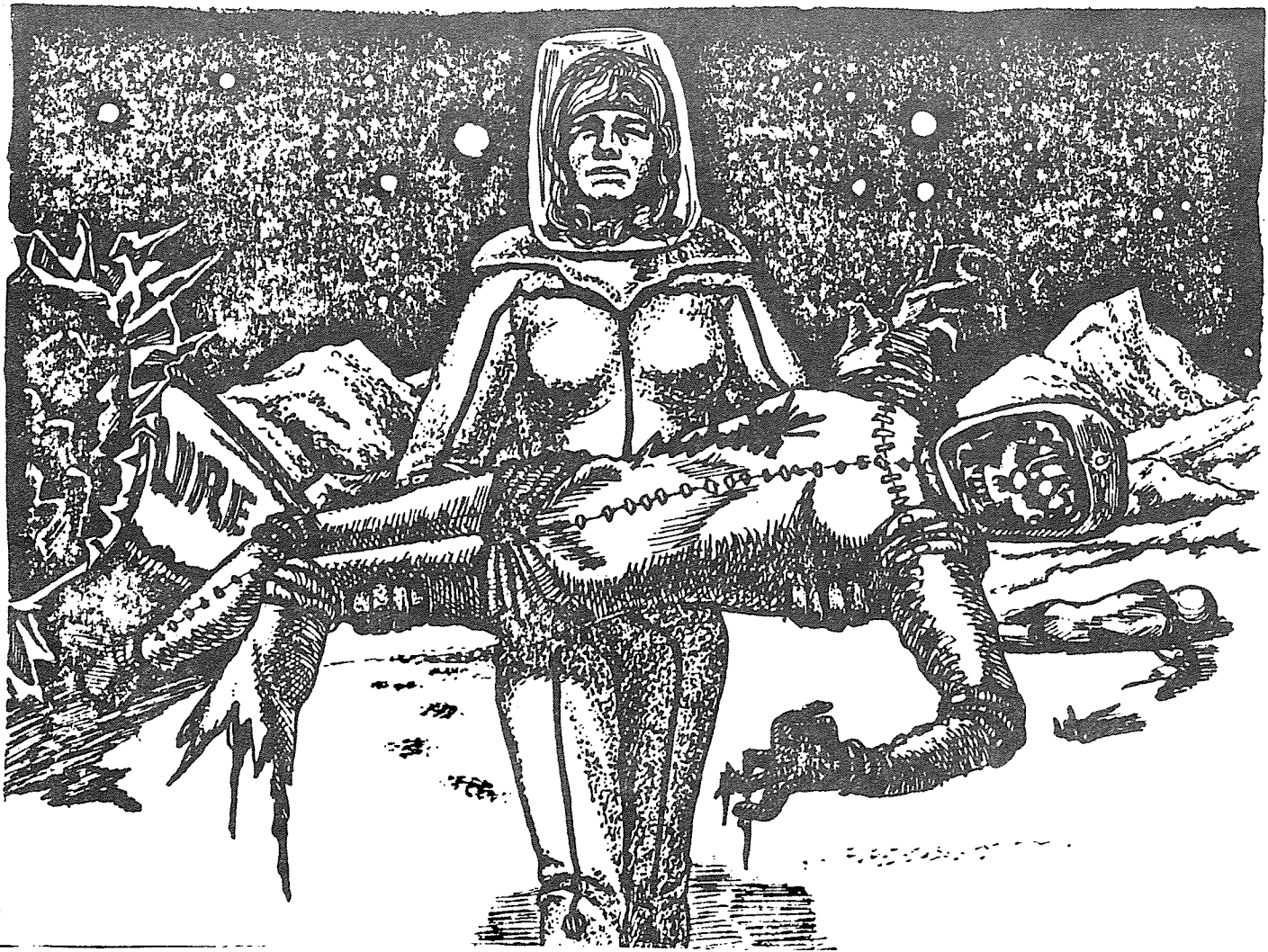
"Another funeral? Good God, who's dead now? How did it happen? Why didn't anyone see fit to tell me?"

"Hush," Bailey whispered. "If that nurse hears you, she'll come tell you it isn't good to get your nerves in an uproar. Don't worry, it's none of our crew. Nothing recent, either. She's gone out to the Mare Imbrium to bury the dead from the old Venture. They've been waiting six years, and Jenneth swore before we left Earth that she'd see them properly buried."

"I see. The Mare Imbrium, is it?" For some reason the thought nagged him; there was some importance to the name of that ship, and he couldn't think what it was. Holes in my memory? I won't have it! I'll track that down.... "I'll be in my quarters," he said, heading for the locker where he'd left his shirt.

Once in his cabin, it took only a few minutes to talk Uhura into giving him a closed-band image and a tie-in with Roantree's suit-communicator. He waited a few moments more, wondering why he felt so obliged to peek, then punched the buttons for reception only.

The scene that opened before him was eerie as well as grim. Against the distant backdrop of pale mountains and black sky stood the ruins of a ship. Its tail rested squarely on the ground, although there were impact-



craters under the landing-feet - as if it had fallen the last few meters and landed upright. At what must once have been the cargo section, the ship was torn raggedly in half. Its whole upper section was ripped off and thrown in the dust, in pieces, several meters away. Scattered in a ragged circle about the ship's feet lay several suited bodies - and pieces of bodies. Directly under the ship stretched a row of graves, obviously fresh to judge from the upright shovel and the footprints near them. The only other footprints were those that followed Jenneth Roantree as she trudged across the sharp-lit crater floor, methodically picking up the pieces of the long-dead crew. The moon's airless surface had allowed no attrition through time, and the wreck looked as if it had happened yesterday. Sharp ends of torn metal gleamed against the sky, and the dust on the unburied was slight and undisturbed. The only sound on the wide gray plain was the quiet sound of weeping in Roantree's voice.

She isn't me, Kirk reminded himself, listening. Just an accident of genes. Not the same mind...or soul. She's a woman, dammit! That does make a difference! He watched her gather up a fragmented body, sobbing a little louder than before, and he noticed how steadily her hands moved. Whatever her emotional reactions were, she wasn't letting them slow her down. He fidgeted uncomfortably, following her progress as she carried the body back to the ship, laid it down at the end of the row, and began shovelling dry dust over it. Kirk watched until she was finished, noting that no seeds were planted on the body. Too late for that, he guessed. Six years exposed to the airless sky...far too late to put a dome over them. I wonder what funeral service she'll use....

Roantree went to a pile of narrow metal sheets, sorted through them, picked one out and brought it back to the new grave. She drove it upright into the ground with a few well-placed blows of her shovel. Kirk looked carefully and saw that there were letters engraved on the metal sheet, forming a single word, a name.

Kirk straightened up, mind whirling, as he realized just whom that body had once been. He stared at the other planted markers, recognizing names.

TYLER, UNA, BOYCE, MITCHELL, COLT

So that's what happened to them - Starfleet's best, the first crew of the Enterprise - in this time-line... They were on that ship, and they died with her. But then...there's one missing....

Through the intercom, Roantree's voice rose to a wordless wail. Kirk focused on her as she lifted another body out of the dust, seeing the ruptured suit, the broken face-plate, and behind it a skull's face - surmounted by a headband bright with frozen blood. From the headband hung a complex collection of mirrors, resembling a lopsided crown. Kirk shivered, realizing what that meant. He was one-eyed, too....

"Chris, oh Chris," Roantree sobbed to the empty skull. "I lost my ship, too. I lost her, but the crew survived. One step further up the beach, Chris. One step, and this time it can carry us over the edge, all the way to Paradise. One step to another universe, Chris. We'll make it. I promise...."

She lifted the rigid body easily in her arms, and carried it to the head of the row of graves. Kirk watched, sweat beading his forehead, as she buried the frozen corpse in the lunar dust and chose a marker, and drove it into the gray, dead ground. The short name on the marker was exactly what he had suspected.

PIKE

Christopher Pike. So this is where he ended, this time...the first Captain of the Enterprise.... Another grim suspicion nibbled. Kirk shut off the screen, as Roantree went for another body, and punched out a simple request to the computer the answer came promptly.

VENTURE, n. Undertaking, endeavor, enterprise....

Kirk shut off his viewer and rested his face in his hands. Parallels, parallels...was all he could think. How much of her is me? I have to know!

When Roantree came up from the moon, wearily shaking its last dust from her boots, Kirk was waiting for her. As soon as she was out of her suit he took her aside, saying nothing until they were alone in one of the library viewing-rooms. Roantree waited, remembering to be patient with his moods, until he took her by the shoulders and asked, very carefully: "Jenneth, who...what was your relationship to Christopher Pike?"

"Chris...." Roantree blinked, jarred by the timeliness of his question. "Oh, you were watching while I buried him! That's not...No, I guess it is fair...Jim, he was my first husband. He married Quanna first, then me. He was the best Co-ordinator we had, and he taught me almost everything I know. He wouldn't let us go with him on the Venture's moon-run, said it was too dangerous to risk the whole family, and it turned out he was right. I swore that someday I'd get to the moon and give him a decent burial." She looked down at the scar on her left hand. "I was very much in love with him, Jim - very happy to marry him. he was...well, big and strong and brave and beautiful, and I...I was just seventeen...." She raised her eyes again, with a wild hope showing in them. "Jim, in your time-line, is Chris...is he...."

"He's alive, Jenneth. Alive and happy, though not exactly well, and he's out of everyone's reach. I have the tapes, if you...really want to see them."

"Of course I do!"

Kirk set the viewer, and images lit the screen: first a readout of Captain Pike's personal history, then excerpts from his logs. Roantree watched, silent and wide-eyed, as the tapes rolled and the moments passed. A faint beep from his chronometer reminded Kirk that it was time to collect Bailey and go down to Engineering, but Roantree didn't seem to notice. Kirk got up silently, wondering why on Earth he'd started this, and slipped out. Roantree didn't even turn her head to watch him go.

Kirk was still worrying over that as he came into Engineering, with Ann Bailey pacing dutifully beside him. He went through the routine inspection and status report with his mind only half on the work, until a squabble in the control room snagged his attention. Bailey muttered something about "another rude bastard" as they climbed into the control room and saw a group of Anarchists - all carrying thick books of computer read-outs that showed diagrams of the engines - converged on one frantic-looking engineer.

"No, no, NO!" the engineer shouted. "I don't care what that iron-mouthed squaw told you; you can't just come down here and start running around on my engines! Will you please get it through your heads that it takes years of instruction to know how to run a starship?"

"We've already started learning," one of the Anarchists said, waving a sheaf of diagrams and obviously making an effort to be patient. "You're supposed to teach us the rest. In exchange, we do whatever you need. Can't you understand a simple exchange?"

"Migod, I can't take the time to play nursemaid to a bunch of...of beginners! You just don't know enough to be of any use down here - so go busy yourselves elsewhere, dammit! Stop bothering me!"

"Arrogant, ill-mannered bastard," Bailey growled, stepping forward. "Listen," she said, planting herself squarely in front of the nervous engineer. "It takes no intelligence to do what one is told, so even if we were the fools you think we are, we could follow instructions. Now if you don't want to be bothered with teaching us, the least you can do is show us someone else who's willing to have us."

"What the hell?" Kirk asked of nobody in particular. Just what's going on here?

"Nobody!" The harried engineer forgot himself. "Nobody wants to take time out to explain the A-B-C's to a bunch of farmers...."

"By the Mother, you need a lesson in manners!" Bailey roared, raising one fist at the engineer. He automatically raised both hands to block, whereupon she kicked him in his exposed crotch. "Try that for size, you rude son-of-a-bitch," she growled, as he slithered green-faced to the deck. "If you're so smart, how come you fell for the oldest trick in the book?"

"Hold it right there!" Kirk yelled. The Anarchists turned in surprise, and he shouldered his way through them and dragged the collapsed engineer to his feet. "Engineer, you're excused," he snapped, pushing the man toward the safety of the door. "Now, will somebody please explain to me what this 'teaching' business is all about?"

The Anarchists explained, volubly, waving their home-made textbooks at him. It took Kirk only a little time to get the idea, but several minutes to thoroughly believe it. "Integrated with my crew: right," he repeated. "You're...mixed with my crew. We're supposed to teach you how to run the ship, so you can help us get to the Guardian. Right. Check. Got it. Whose idea was this?!?"

"All of us!" the Anarchists replied in unison. "...and your staff-experts agreed," Ann Bailey added. "We talked about it after you left the meeting. Didn't Citizen Scott tell you?"

"No, I suppose he was too busy." There's a lot that Scotty didn't tell me. "Well, uh, for now let's hunt up someone else to handle your, ah, instruction. Hey, you!" He pointed to a hapless ensign who had dared to tiptoe out from behind a control deck for a peek. "Yes, you. Come here. See all these people? They're your new staff - at least for this shift. They're going to help you take care of the engines, understand? If anything needs to be done, you explain it to them - carefully, in simple words - and they'll do it. They're supposed to learn from you. Understand? Good. Now I'll be back shortly, but while I'm gone you're to explain the engines to them. Got that? Good."

With that, he turned and hurried out of the control room, leaving the hapless ensign surrounded by curious Anarchists. As he left, he heard the nervous engineer begin in a small voice, "Well, this is the ion-feed gauge..." and all the Anarchists dutifully turning pages in their print-out books.

As Kirk stepped out of the turbolift, Scott flinched and turned an apprehensive look at him - then saw who it was and relaxed visibly. "Ah, Captain," he began before Kirk could open his mouth, "are those the Engineering reports, then? And, er, is Co-ordinator Roantree with ye?"

"Yes and no," Kirk answered, wondering what the hell had Scott so rattled.

"Oh fine, fine," Scott almost gibbered, hopping out of the chair. "I'll come doon wi' ye and look 'em over. Ah, Mr. Sulu, ye have the con." He glanced nervously at Quannechota, who responded with a calmly unreadable stare, and all but dragged Kirk into the turbolife.

"Scotty, what's going on here?" Kirk asked, watching the Chief-Engineer-and-Acting-Captain sag against the bulkhead. "Why are the Anarchists all over the ship? And why did you agree to teach them how to run the Enterprise?"

"Sir, it wasna ma idea!" Scott almost wailed. "I woke up this mornin', came onta the bridge, and there was Captain Roantree presentin' me wi' a completed takeover! Apparently she bullied the rest o' the senior officers inta acceptin' it while I was gone, and she didna waste a minute tellin' her people ta disperse themselves all over the ship. They're everywhere, even on the bridge! I canna get rid of 'em! There's no way ta trick 'em or argue 'em inta leavin', and thot great black bear of a communications-man did somethin' ta Uhura's board sa thot anythin' we say on the bridge is heard all over the ship, so we darena try anythin' funny...." Scott wiped sweat off his forehead with an already-wet sleeve. "They're determined ta go wi' us ta the Guardian, and I canna see any way ta stop 'em, short o' provokin' an open battle. I...wouldna care ta do thot, if it can be avoided...."

"Why not?" Kirk prodded, wondering if Scotty felt as he did about the Sunfire's crew, and what the Enterprise owed them.

"Weel, Sir..." Scott seemed to wilt inside his uniform. "For one thing, I'm no' sure we could beat 'em in a fight; they're all well trained fighters o' no mean ability, and we dinna have enough Security personnel ta deal wi' 'em. For another thing, there's many among the crew... particularly those wha helped 'em in the mining... wha sympathize wi' 'em; I'm afraid that turnin' on the Anarchists would provoke a real mutiny, bad feelin' at the verra least and wi' us sa short-handed, we canna afford it. And finally..." He shuffled a bit and looked at his feet. "Well, they truly are brave and clever folk, and they've near shredded thesel's ta help us get home...and I'd much rather have 'em for allies than enemies, Sir. We've no' sa many friends in this universe thot we can afford to throw any away."

"I see," said Kirk, surprised to feel the tension in his back as it faded. "So what's the ship's status? How much are the Anarchists impairing the crew's efficiency?"

"Surprisin'ly little," Scott was relieved to admit. "They're eager as Starfleet Academy freshmen, and they learn marvelously fast, and they spend all o' their spare time studyin' on the computer. Tis incredible hoo much information they can absorb."

"'Ninety-Day Wonders,'" Kirk murmured. "Do you remember your Military History, Scotty?"

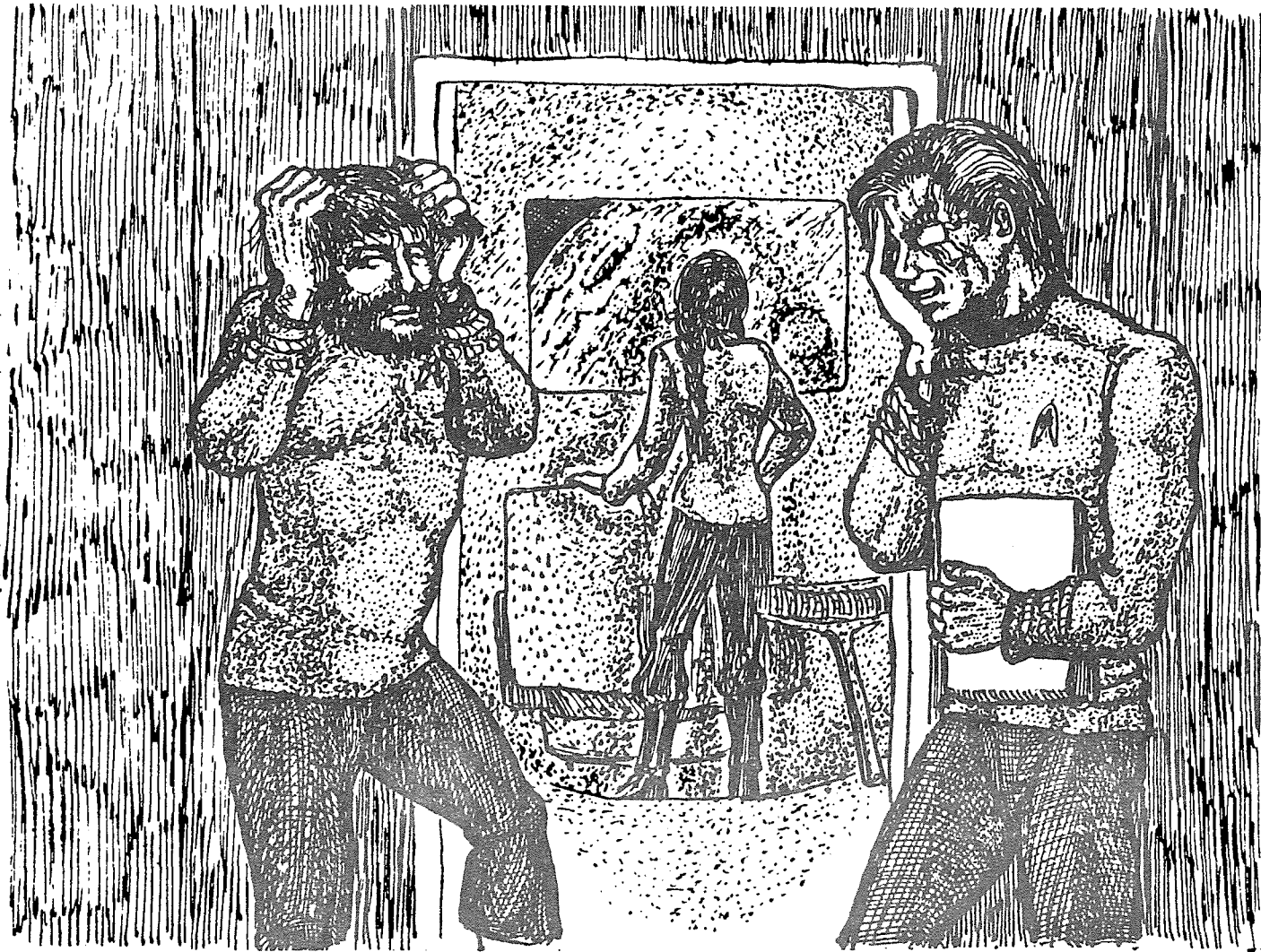
"Aye, I know a bit, though I never studied it formally. I'm afraid I dinna recognize the term."

"It's from Earth history, World War Two. The war caught the Allies ill-prepared; specifically, they were short on officers. What they did was take promising students and give them a crash-course - cram four years' worth of instruction into three months. The graduates were nicknamed 'Ninety-Day wonders.'"

"Hmmm. Did it work?"

"Well, the Allies won the war."

"Aye, they did...." Scott thoughtfully scratched his cheek. "I seem ta recall somethin' similar aboot Napoleon. He doubled the size o' his army in short order by pairin' each new recruit wi' an experienced old soldier wha could show him the ropes, so ta speak. Aye, and it worked for Napoleon, too...."



"It can work for us, Scotty. It'll have to."

"Aye, I suppose it can, but.... Dammit, Sir, neither the Allies nor Napoleon had ta deal wi' such a mob o' insubordinates! Och, ye wouldna believe what a discipline problem they are! Ye canna tell 'em anythin' but that they've got ta ask a hundred questions, make a thousand suggestions, and then do it their own way, likely as not. And they always have ta sit doon and argue aboot what they're doin' afterwards, and they've no sense o' rank at all. 'Tis enough to drive a mon ta drink! How, in God's name does Roantree do it? ...Sir, what are ye laughin' at?"

Kirk leaned against the bulkhead and let himself go in a real belly-laugh. "Oh, Scotty," he managed to gasp between guffaws. "I know! Believe me, I know! I had to deal with them for less than a week at Camp Clavius, and it almost drove me to drink! Ho! Ho! I sympathize! I really do!"

"Weel, what am I supposed ta do, then?" Scott almost wailed. "Hoo am I goin' ta handle this undisciplined lot?"

"Ho! Ho! Ask Jenneth! Hee! Hee!"

"Ask Captain Roantree?! Oh, aye! Sure! Ask Captain Roantree!" Scott grabbed two handfuls of his hair and tried bravely to pull them out. "She's attached hersel' ta me, if ye please, claimin' 'tis fittin' for her ta be 'apprenticed ta the Co-ordinator!' She's underfoot on the bridge damned near all the time - askin' questions, makin' suggestions, tellin' things ta the bridge crew - and half the time they do 'em before they stop ta think! Ma God, we've got two Captains noo, not even countin' yerself!"

Kirk only laughed some more. "Scotty, nobody ever told you command was easy. Just think, if you don't have me up there in one form, you've got me in another! Ho! Ho!"

"Och, Captain," Scott moaned. "I never did want ta take yer job from ye. If the doctor would let me, I'd gladly hand the command right back ta ye. By God, Sir, I wish ye'd spend as much o' yer time as the doctor will allow up on the bridge wi' me, keepin' Captain Roantree from completely takin' over the ship!"

Kirk stopped laughing. "No," he said. "I don't belong there anymore."

"Dammit, Sir, ye could at least keep watch from ma Engineering console...."

"I said no!" So did Dr. M'Benga! So did all of you! Do you think you can sneak me in through the back door after you've kicked me out through the front?

"A'right," Scott muttered, rubbing his forehead. "I can see why...see yer point. I'll no' trouble ye again." He stepped toward the doors, but tossed a last comment over his shoulder. "Dammit, Sir, as soon as Dr. M'Benga says yer fit, I'll order ye back on the bridge sa fast it'll make yer head spin. Is that clear?"

"Clear," Kirk replied expressionlessly. As likely as a snowball in hell, this side of time!

Scott left the turbolife, marched back onto the bridge, and spent the rest of his shift being miserable and depressed. Kirk went back down to Engineering and found, much to his surprise, that the woebegone ensign he'd left in charge was getting along quite well with the Anarchists. Kirk made a note in his report to the effect that not only were the Anarchists very apt pupils, but that the unimpressive little ensign had hitherto-unknown talents for teaching. The discovery made him feel much better, and he spent the rest of his shift in a relatively good mood.

Four hours later, his term done and a comforting sense of solid achievement under his belt, Kirk remembered to think of Roantree. A quick call through the intercom didn't raise her. Following a hunch, he went back to the viewing room. Yes, she was still there...bent over the table with her face resting on her forearms, breathing very quietly, as if she'd cried herself dry. The viewing screen was blank, but there was a tape playing an old folksong on the audio.

And if he's found another love,
And he and his love both married be,
Then I wish them health and happiness
Where they dwell across the sea.

On the last words she raised one hand and punched off the tape. Kirk stood still, undecided whether to advance or retreat quietly, but she noticed him and gave him a weary imitation of her usually-infectious grin, and motioned him forward to take a seat.

"So," she said "he's with the Illusion-Makers of Talos. All right, it could be worse. I'll never see him again - even if I did, I doubt if he'd know me - but at least he's happy, and well-cared for. He may be mangled, but he doesn't have to live with it...." She sat up slowly and studied Kirk's scarred face. "Jim, if you had the chance, would you go with the Illusion-Makers?"

Kirk thought carefully before answering. "No, I don't think I would. Life or death for me, but no illusions. I want as much of the truth as I can get...or stand."

"Same here," she said. "We're alike in that, too."

"One and the same," Kirk admitted. That's why I told her about Chris, and showed her the tapes! Testing! I...I can't really believe she's me until I see how she can be hurt! I've got to stop that. It's cruelly unfair. And...what if she passes my test better than I do? Leave be! Make truce and accept her as she is. "Une et tous le meme chose," he repeated.

"Jim," said Roantree, staring at him narrowly. "We may be closer than you realize. Where did you learn to speak Quebecois?"

"In High Harbor, of course.... Oh, my God! I...you...." He stared at her, horrified and his hands clutched at his head as if to hold his memories in place. "Jenneth! Our minds are bleeding into each other!"

"As if we truly were twins," she agreed. "Perhaps the heavy retraining you've been doing has increased it. Are you afraid of it?"

"I'm afraid of losing my identity!"

"Don't worry," Roantree laughed. "If you really are like me, then you've got too big an ego to lose! If you've led a life anywhere near as wild and woolly as mine, then you should know that by now. Oh, we're alike, all right; feisty, strong-willed, stubborn, a little self-centered, and more than a little fierce. No, we won't lose ourselves, Jim, I think we'll just gain some memories."

"You might not want all of mine." I don't think I really want any of yours! And...what if she learns about Starfleet, and the Federation? "How much have you seen?"

"Just feelings, so far, and only strong ones at that. I knew how you felt when you left that bloody conference yesterday. That's why I sent Scotty after you, to tell you that there was hope, and this wasn't the end, and you didn't have to...." She shrugged expressively.

"Oh. You felt that...." Kirk went hot and cold by quick turns, then thought that over, and in the end was grateful. "Thanks, Jen. You both stopped me from doing something...unnecessary."

"That's one advantage, and there could be others." She stood up and moved toward the door. "For example, if you want to come down to the gym with me, I think I can teach you the Sun-snake before dinner."

"Why not?" Kirk grinned back as he got up and followed her.

* * * * *

Captain's Log, Stardate 6117.7.

IT'S ALL ALMOST DONE. CAMP CLAVIUS IS EVACUATED, THE CRYSTALS ARE REFINED AS FAR AS POSSIBLE, INSTALLED AND TESTED. THE ANARCHIST CREW HAS INTEGRATED AMAZINGLY WELL WITH OUR OWN. DISCIPLINE HAS GROWN LAX - NATURALLY, ONE CAN'T ACT TOO MILITARILY IN FRONT OF A GANG OF ANARCHISTS WITHOUT BOTHERING THEM - BUT THEIR "APPRENTICE/TEACHER" SYSTEM SEEMS TO WORK WITH SURPRISING EFFICIENCY. I WOULDN'T HAVE BELIEVED IT IF I HADN'T SEEN IT MYSELF, BUT THE ANARCHISTS ARE INDEED CAPABLE OF A HIGH DEGREE OF ORGANIZATION AND CONCERTED ACTION. THE ANTHROPOLOGISTS ARE PRACTICALLY GIBBERING OVER THAT. OF COURSE, THEY ARE PARTICULARLY WELL-MOTIVATED....

THE NEWS FROM EARTH ISN'T TOO GOOD. STILL NO WORD FROM THE HIGH HARBOR EMIGRANTS, AND STILL NO FURTHER VOLUNTEERS FROM THE ENTERPRISE CREW'S SETTLEMENT. CHARLIE FOGLIO, CO-ORDINATOR OF THE CANNIBAL WHEEL, SAYS NOT TO WORRY ABOUT THE EMIGRANTS; WHEN HE LAST HEARD FROM THEM, THEY WERE WELL OUT OF REACH OF ANYBODY WHO MIGHT RECOGNIZE THEM, OUT ON THE LAKE AND MOVING DOWN THE COASTLINE, TROUBLED ONLY BY WEATHER. NO REASON TO WORRY, HE SAYS, UNLESS THEY FAIL TO ARRIVE AT THE SETTLEMENT WITHIN REASONABLE TIME. JENNETH AND HER CREW ARE NERVOUS, NONETHELESS. CAN'T BLAME THEM.

THE WHEEL ITSELF IS DOING WELL; THEY'VE SNAGGED SOME MORE SPACE-GARBAGE AND ARE HOPING TO CONSTRUCT ANOTHER SHIP. THEIR SUPPLIES ARE HOLDING OUT WELL, AND THEY DON'T EXPECT TO NEED MORE UNTIL WELL AFTER WE CAN GET BACK FROM THE GUARDIAN...OF COURSE, AFTER THAT, THEY MIGHT NOT NEED ANY HELP. WE JUST DON'T KNOW WHAT WILL HAPPEN WHEN TIME STRAIGHTENS ITSELF OUT. THE GUARDIAN WORKS IN STRANGE WAYS.

ANOTHER PUZZLE: UHURA REPORTS ODD SIGNALS, POSSIBLY CAUSED BY INTELLIGENT LIFE, AT EXTREME SENSOR RANGE. NOBODY HAS ANY IDEA WHAT IT COULD BE - ALTHOUGH JENNETH JOKINGLY SUGGESTED "FLYING SAUCERS," AND I CAN THINK OF A HUNDRED POSSIBLE MENACES. WE MAY FIND OUT AS WE LEAVE THE SOLAR SYSTEM. WHATEVER IT IS, I HOPE IT'S NOTHING THAT WILL OVERTAX THE SHIP; THIS MISSION TAKES PRECEDENCE OVER EVERYTHING. EVERYTHING!

FOR MYSELF, I'M DOING BETTER THAN I EXPECTED: SPEECH IMPROVING, NUMBNESS GOING, HANDWRITING NEARLY NORMAL, I LIMP ONLY A LITTLE, AND THE BRACE DOESN'T SEEM TO DRAG NEARLY AS MUCH. I CAN MAKE IT. I CAN GET IT ALL BACK...

AND MY NEW JOB ISN'T JUST MAKE-WORK; I'M HAVING ALMOST AS TOUGH A TIME RUNNING THE ENGINEERING SECTION AS SCOTTY IS ON THE BRIDGE, AND I'M USED TO THE ANARCHISTS! SCOTTY INVITED ME TO A 'WEE DRINK' IN HIS CABIN LAST NIGHT, AND INSISTED AGAIN THAT HE NEVER WANTED TO TAKE MY JOB, CAN'T WAIT TO GET BACK TO HIS BELOVED ENGINES, AND IS STILL MY FRIEND NO MATTER WHAT HAPPENS. VERY GOOD TO KNOW. WE SWAPPED INFORMATION AND COMMISERATED OVER THE PROBLEMS OF OUR DEPARTMENTS, AND HE NEEDED INFO MORE THAN I DID. I'M NOT AS FAR GONE AS I THOUGHT...OR MAYBE THIS IS THE EFFECT OF HAVING A SMALLER CREW, AND ONE-FOURTH OF IT ANARCHISTS, AND A MISSION THIS DESPERATE, AND NO STARFLEET COMMAND TO YELL TO. LAX DISCIPLINE, BLURRING OF RANKS - IT SHOULD BE DISASTROUS, BUT IT ISN'T. THERE'S THAT UNEXPECTED EFFICIENCY, AND AN UNEXPECTED CLOSENESS BETWEEN US... HOW MUCH OF THIS IS THE EFFECT OF THE ANARCHISTS? HOW MUCH OF THEIR IDEAS ARE RUBBING OFF ON US?

...AND, AM I 'GOING NATIVE,' AS I'VE OVERHEARD A FEW CREWMEN SAY? I SEEM TO SPEND MORE TIME WITH THE ANARCHISTS NOW, TO BE CLOSER TO THEM, THAN WITH MY OWN CREW. IS IT BECAUSE OF MY DEMOTION, OR BECAUSE I'VE LIVED AND WORKED WITH THEM MORE THAN THE OTHERS HAVE, OR BECAUSE I CAN'T HELP BUT BE GRATEFUL FOR ALL THEY'VE DONE FOR ME? I DON'T KNOW, THEY'VE ACCEPTED ME TOTALLY, THEY TREAT ME AS ONE OF THEM, AND...AND IT'S A VERY GOOD FEELING TO BE SO ACCEPTED. I'VE PUT OFF CUTTING MY HAIR, ALTHOUGH IT'S ALMOST DOWN TO MY SHOULDERS NOW. I'VE LEARNED TO DRINK THEIR BRAND OF BEER, ACCEPT THEIR CUSTOMS WITHOUT BLUSHING, EVEN SING SOME OF THEIR SONGS...AND I COULDN'T EVEN CARRY A TUNE BEFORE! IS THAT JENNETH'S DOING, OR THE RESULT OF THE RETRAINING? SAME THING WITH THE DANCING; I LEARNED THE "SUN-SNAKE" IN SHORT ORDER - IT'S RELATIVELY EASY, A SIMPLE LINE-DANCE - AND I SHOULD BE ABLE TO MANAGE IT AT THE PARTY TONIGHT.

I'M EAGER TO SEE WHAT THAT WILL BE LIKE. APPARENTLY IT'S A CLOSED PARTY; THE ONLY ENTERPRISE PEOPLE INVITED ARE ME, SCOTTY, CHEKOV, AND JOHN YELLOWHORSE. THE ANARCHISTS HINTED BROADLY THAT IT'S SOME SORT OF RELIGIOUS FESTIVAL WITH LOTS OF DRINKING AND DANCING AND SOME KIND OF MUMMER'S PLAY. JOHN YELLOWHORSE SAYS IT SHOULD HAVE SOMETHING TO DO WITH THE 'RENEWAL OF THE SUN,' OR THE RESTARTING OF THE SOLAR CYCLE, PROBABLY A SYMBOLIC DEATH-AND-REBIRTH RITUAL. SOUNDS FASCINATING. KNOWING THE ANARCHISTS, I SUSPECT IT MIGHT TURN INTO A FULL-FLEDGED ORGY. IT'S BEEN AWHILE SINCE I'VE SEEN A REAL ORGY....

WELL, WHATEVER'S GOING TO HAPPEN, I'LL HAVE THE BEST POSSIBLE VIEW; QUANNA TOLD ME THIS MORNING THAT THEY'VE CHOSEN HER TO PLAY THE 'MOON DANCER,' AND SHE CHOSE ME TO BE THE 'SUN-HERO,' WHATEVER THAT MEANS. JOHN YELLOWHORSE SAYS IT'S DEFINITELY A GREAT HONOR, WHICH IS NICE TO KNOW, BUT ALL QUANNA WOULD TELL ME IS THAT I SHOULD DO WHAT SHE TELLS ME AND ANSWER 'YES' TO ALL QUESTIONS. THAT ISN'T MUCH OF A SCRIPT, BUT I THINK I CAN MANAGE. I ASKED HER WHAT I SHOULD WEAR TO THE PARTY, AND SHE SAID TO BE SURE TO WEAR MY GOLD SHIRT, BUT NOTHING ON MY HEAD. CURI-USER AND CURIUSER! BUT IT SOUNDS LIKE FUN, AND I COULD USE A LITTLE OF THAT.

* * * * *

"Ye know, I think I'm beginnin' ta get a taste for this beer," Scott commented, idly smoothing down the folds of his kilt. "Will ye no' have some, Chekov? Dinna worry; 'tis weak stuff in all but taste."

"Perhaps I will." Chekov slipped off his pile of pillows and stood up. "It's a special occasion, efter all."

"Could you bring me a refill, while you're at it?" John Yellowhorse held out his mug for Chekov to take. "Mr. Scott, do you think you can identify this brew according to origins? I think it resembles one of the dark German beers, which would relate nicely to their use of German as a technical language...."

"Sure is," said Sparks, settling down beside him on the pillows. "Most of Michigan was settled by Germans and Frenchies, and the rest's Chippewa. So, we got technical German and dark beer, along with lots of French and Indian ways."

"Remarkable ethnographic stability!" Yellowhorse chortled. "Can you trace most of your customs to their ethnic origins? This custom of reclining on cushions, instead of sitting on chairs, for example; is that obscure French or Chippewa?"

"Neither. It's plain practicality. Everybody gets plastered at Yule, so you don't want any furniture around to get smashed, and you want soft places for people to fall on."

"Oh. Er, Yule celebration itself - is that primarily peasant-German, or French or Indian?"

"All of 'em and more," Sparks replied thoughtfully, scratching his beard. "Solstice folk-customs are pretty much the same everywhere, older'n any country or any one people. We sort of put 'em all together."

"All of them? Even the 'Hunting of the Wren,' or an animal sacrifice or some other ritual killing of the Spirit of the Old Year?"

"Sure. Back in High Harbor we used to hunt a bear, and eat it at the Yule feast while the Sun-Hero wore its skin, but we can't do that up here."

"I see...." John Yellowhorse glanced thoughtfully toward the far side of the room where Kirk half-lay beside Quannechota on another pile of pillows, enviously watching Jenneth Roantree lead the double row of Anarchists through the Northern Reel. "And...what do you do if you can't get a bear?"

"We'll just have to do without it," Sparks yawned. "Your ship's food isn't too bad, although there won't be that much importance to the feast...in fact, I think they're bringing the food out now, over there on the serving-table. As for the rest, I guess the Sun-hero can get through the Year-Play without a real bearskin."

"The 'Year-Play'...." John Yellowhorse murmured, beginning to worry a little. "Does the Cap...does the Sun-Hero know what's going to happen to him? Just how far does the play go?"

Before Sparks could answer, Chekov came back balancing a tray of mugs and platters. "Heppy Yule!" he announced. "Why didn't somebody tell me thet the party includes dinner?"

"We were just discussin' that," said Sparks, reaching for a plate. "Actually, this isn't much as Yule-feasts go; there's no bear-meat."

"'Bear-mitt?'" Chekov puzzled as he handed out plates and mugs. "Do you pipple usually itt bears?"

"Only at winter Solstice...ah, nice cranberry sauce. At summer Solstice it's a bull. Right now, though, it's just computer-meat. Pity."

Nobody else thought so. Everyone dug enthusiastically into the food, except John Yellowhorse, who was too busy taking notes. The plates were cleared with remarkable speed, and Sparks obligingly gathered up the empties and carted them away.

"This is turning into a wery nice party," Cheov was explaining as Sparks came back with more beer. "All the women at the serwing-table made eyes at me, and a few did more than that."

"Pick one you like," Sparks laughed, settling beside him. "Once the Year's-Play is over, you're probably going to need a lively one. Got to ground out the excess energy, so to speak."

"Och, then, does it turn into an Orgy?" Scott asked eagerly, trying to sound shocked. "A real, live Orgy?"

"Sure," Sparks answered amiably around a mouthful of beer. "Better choose a mate now, though, if you're planning to join in. Later on, you'll be too plastered to see straight."

"Shockin', simply shockin'...." Scott murmured, running his eyes over the dancing women. "Can I pick any of 'em?"

"Any that'll have you," Sparks laughed. "You're not exactly the prettiest man here, you know."

"Och, indeed!" Scott looked hurt. "Begod, I'll have one before the night's over. Ye just wait and see!"

"Me too!" Chekov looked as wide-eyed as a small boy in a candy store. "So many handsome ledies.... This is a fine, fine party, Mistair Sparks. I'm wery glad that I was inwited."

"Yes," John Yellowhorse picked up on the thought. "Why were we invited, Citizen? Why just the four of us?"

"Well, you because you're an Anthropologist, and social scientists get special permission for such things; Kirk because he's the accepted Sun-Hero, and the rest of you because you're his Heirs and Successors...'Inter-reges,' we'd call you. Stand-ins."

"You mean...." John Yellowhorse gulped, beginning to see a pattern. "Scotty, because he took Kirk's place as...as Co-ordinator, and Chekov because...he took Kirk's side at the competency hearing?" He ignored the way Scott and Chekov stared at that last; if they didn't know by now that the story was all over the ship, it was high time they learned. "So they're sort of...his 'seconds?' Sparks, just what is the 'Sun-Hero' supposed to do?"

"What's this about Kirk?" asked Ann Bailey, coming up behind them. "Are there any complaints against him?"

"Oh no," John Yellowhorse clarified. "I was just asking...about the Year-Play in particular - what is the role and character of the Sun-Hero?"

"Kirk?" Bailey misunderstood. "Quanna says he has the right character for it, and I think we can trust her judgment, but I just wouldn't know. I've been working with him down among the engines for the last few days, and I don't entirely understand him. He's fierce and brooding and snappish, and a little bit prudish. Is that just because of what he's been through lately, or is he always like that?"

"He's often worse," Scott grumbled, suddenly depressed over the whole ugly Command business, and a little too bitter to guard his tongue. "We're used to it. We know him. We know he can be vain and shallow and hot-tempered and a bit prissy. He's a Starship Captain, and verra typical o' the breed. They're all like that: brave, passionate, bull-headed, stubborn, and proud as Lucifer. Aye, and like Lucifer, he can fall far."

"Well," Bailey said thoughtfully, into the shocked silence, "he's still prissy, anyway."

"That's not fair!" Chekov snapped indignantly. "He's plenty of other t'ings as well, and you know it! He's brilliant, and quick-t'inking - otherwise he wouldn't be the best Keptain in the flitt! And he's always wery careful to be chust and fair and to undairstand other pipple's wiewpoint, efen if he doesn't egree wit' them, and he's terribly protectif of eweryone on his ship, and...and.... Oh, we should nefer hef left him alone!"

"Aye, I know...I know." Scott buried his face in his beer-mug, miserably wishing he could find a hole to crawl into and then pull it in after him.

"So that's it," said Sparks, looking enlightened. "So that's why Quanna suggested him for the Sun-Hero. Yes, it all makes sense. And that's why you keep the old title for the Co-ordinator?"

"Huh? Oh, aye," said Scott, realizing his mistake and glad to get safely out of it. "'Captain' is an ancient title, a'right."

"I see," Bailey concurred. "You people are formal - very ritualized, as the Braider said, because you live so crowded. That's why he couldn't be Captain after he lost his eye; by the old strict form, a Sun-Hero has to be unmarried! Well, well, well; now I understand it."

"It's not so strict with us poor country-folk," Sparks apologized. "A man can be Sun-Hero if he's physically messed up, just so long as he can breed and work and think well. We don't have to be as formal as you people...smaller population, less crowding, and all that."

Scott and Chekov smiled vaguely; all this was going completely over their heads. John Yellowhorse took rapid notes, momentarily forgetting his earlier question.

The music stopped. The dancers on the floor broke out of the pattern and drifted toward the table to finish their share of dinner. Jenneth Roantree checked the wall chronometer, picked up her 12-string and ambled toward Sparks and the others. Quannechota gave Kirk a kiss, whispered something to him, and got up and walked away. Kirk glanced after her, shrugged, got up and came over to the cushion-pile with his crewmen and Roantree.

"One of these days," he promised, looking toward Roantree, "I'll be able to keep up with you on the Northern Reel. All I need is a little more practice." He smiled almost defiantly at Scott and Chekov, who nodded glibly and busied themselves with their beer-mugs. Satisfied, he leaned back on the cushions and slowly finished his own beer, listening while Roantree tuned up her 12-string and ran through "The Holly and the Ivy" for the dozenth time, trying to memorize the odd and obscure verses that she used. Roantree noticed his attention, and grinned and switched to a parody of the song, describing what happened when a kitten got into the ornaments, the presents, and the newly-trimmed tree. Everybody laughed together.

"You've got to teach me that one," Kirk chuckled. "Hmm, my mug's empty. Could somebody get me a beer?"

"Patience," said Roantree, peering past him. "Here comes Jean with the Speaker's Cup."

"Time! Time! Time!" shouted Jean Battre-Le-Diable, shouldering his way through the crowd. He held a big ugly ceramic cup in one hand, and a large sloshing earthenware jug in the other. "Time! Time! Circle up, Citizens; it's time!"

The other Anarchists picked up cushions and settled themselves in a wide ragged circle that took in the seated party. Jean paused in the center, glanced around the closed ring, and offered the cup and jug to Roantree.

"No, you do it," she insisted. "I'm the Outrider this year, remember?"

"Oh, right!" said Jean, looking embarrassed. He sat down, hefted the jug, and poured the Speaker's Cup full of a bright yellow liquid.

"'Outrider?'" John Yellowhorse inquired softly in Sparks ear.

"Yeah, the one who stays out," Sparks explained. "The Ishmael, the Tour-Guide, the Fair Observer - you know."

"...Sure," John Yellowhorse agreed, not understanding at all, but scribbling it down in detail.

Jean Battre-Le-Diable lifted the filled cup and chanted: "For the death of the Old Year and the coming of the New, for the fall and rise of the Sun, for the changing of the cycle - Ave Sol Invictus!" As the crowd repeated the last three words, he drank from the cup, then handed it to the nearest person on his left - who happened to be Sparks.

Sparks thought for a moment, grinned sourly, raised the cup and toasted: "May all my enemies go to hell. Noel, noel, noel, noel!" He drank while the others laughed and passed the cup to Bailey.

"May we live to see our children live," she said quietly. There wasn't a sound while she drank and passed the cup to Scott.

Scott looked puzzled for a moment, then understood what he was supposed to do. "Let no harm befall the ship until we're safely home," he said. There was a soft murmur of agreement as he drank and handed the cup to Chekov. "Och," he grumbled, wiping his mouth. "Yon's no' beer. 'Tis naethin' but sour fruit juice."

"What am I supposed to do?" Chekov whispered nervously to John Yellowhorse.

"Make a toast, drink, and pass it on," the anthropologist whispered back. "I suspect you shouldn't repeat a toast or set the cup down."



"Wery well..." Chekov thought a moment, then announced lamely, "to the future." There was an amiable mumble of agreement as he passed the cup to John Yellowhorse.

"Ah...to the unbroken circle, that what falls may rise again," he said. Not very good poetry, but I think I got the symbols right. The Anarchists cheered enthusiastically as he drank. What is this stuff? he wondered as he passed the cup to Roantree. Non-alcoholic? That doesn't make sense. An orgiastic ritual with no consciousness-altering agents?...wait a minute. It could be... All sorts of mushrooms grow in Michigan... Oh-oh. "Scotty," he bent and whispered to them. "How much of that stuff did you drink?"

"To the dead that lie below us," Roantree was saying. "May the blood of our dead, willingly offered, have such force as the blood of the Sun; and may all gods that love brave souls accept the offering, and help us into Paradise." She raised the cup in a salute, but didn't drink. There was a soft chorus of mumbled "right on" as she handed the cup to Kirk.

Kirk looked into the cup, then turned to Roantree and complained in a whisper, "It's nearly empty." She gave him an odd smile and signalled to Jean Battre-Le-Diable, who obligingly came forward and refilled the cup from the jug. Kirk studied the gold fluid for a moment, trying to think of a suitable departure-eve toast. What would please this bunch of scientific pagans? he wondered. Where we're going.... Hmmm, the Guardian: there's a power and an enigma for you - the kind of thing that primitives would call a god.... "To our safe arrival at the Guardian of Forever," he said. "And may the Guardian be merciful and generous, for once, and give us back everything that we should have had."

The Anarchists cheered as he drank. He was thirsty, and the odd-tasting fruit punch was pleasantly cold, and he drained half the cup before passing it on. John Yellowhorse watched the level in the cup go down, and gnawed his knuckles, and wondered just what was in that punch, and how it would effect the Captain, and whether or not Jenneth Roantree knew what she was doing.

"Interesting punch," said Kirk, leaning back on the cushions and glancing up at Roantree. "Where's Quannechota, and what did she mean about getting dressed?"

"She's been chosen Moon-Dancer, you know," Roantree explained. "She's dressing for the dance, and she'll come out as soon as the cup's gone all around."

Kirk shrugged and turned his attention to the other toasts, some of which were quite interesting. John Yellowhorse took copious notes. Scott grumbled that the "domned fruit punch" had put his tongue to sleep. Sparks and Bailey laughed conspiratorially. The cup completed its circular journey and was handed back to Jean Battre-Le-Diable, who stood up to make the closing toast.

"Citizens, for all it could have been, should have been, and might yet be, I give you our world - and welcome to it!" Amid shouts of "Sunrise!" he drained the last of the punch and then swung the cup hard toward the ceiling, so that the last drops flew into the air. John Yellowhorse scribbled: Libation, up. To sky gods?

Sparks got up and shambled to the light controls, and dimmed them until the room was filled with sudden twilight. All the talking ceased, and the only sound was the chiming of Roantree's 12-string as she chose a key and sounded a warning chord. The other Anarchists picked up the key and hummed along with her, a few voices falling into harmony. A hymn, John Yellowhorse scribbled as Sparks came back to the circle and sat down beside Roantree.

Four other Anarchists got up, pulled out their long utility-knives, and placed them carefully on the floor in the middle of the circle - lying at right-angles, points touching - and then went back to their places. The repeated chord and the humming grew louder.

Kirk, turning this way and that so as to miss nothing, was the first to see the Moon-Dancer approach. What he saw first, advancing from the shadows, was a pair of flickering lights, pale blue, like the glowing eyes of some fabulous wild beast. As the lights drew near he saw that they were two cups full of some flaming liquid - possibly alcohol - held in two oddly-gleaming hands. Closer still, and Kirk gasped audibly as he got full view of the Moon-Dancer. It was Quannechota, but as he'd never seen or imagined her. She was wearing nothing but a long-fringed metal belt about the hips, and her black hair hung straight and unbound, and except for her black-painted eyebrows and lashes she was coated from head to foot in gleaming silver. She might have been an android, or a statue set to motion, or a creature from another world, or an arcane goddess - but she looked like nothing human, and nothing borne of Earth.

She walked through the circle to the cross-laid knives, set her feet squarely in opposite corners of the metal formation, and raised the fire-cups high. Roantree's 12-string played a solemn tune, sounding once through a sequence of four lines, the humming voices keeping pace with her. As she started into the tune a second time, the voices shifted from humming to clear words.

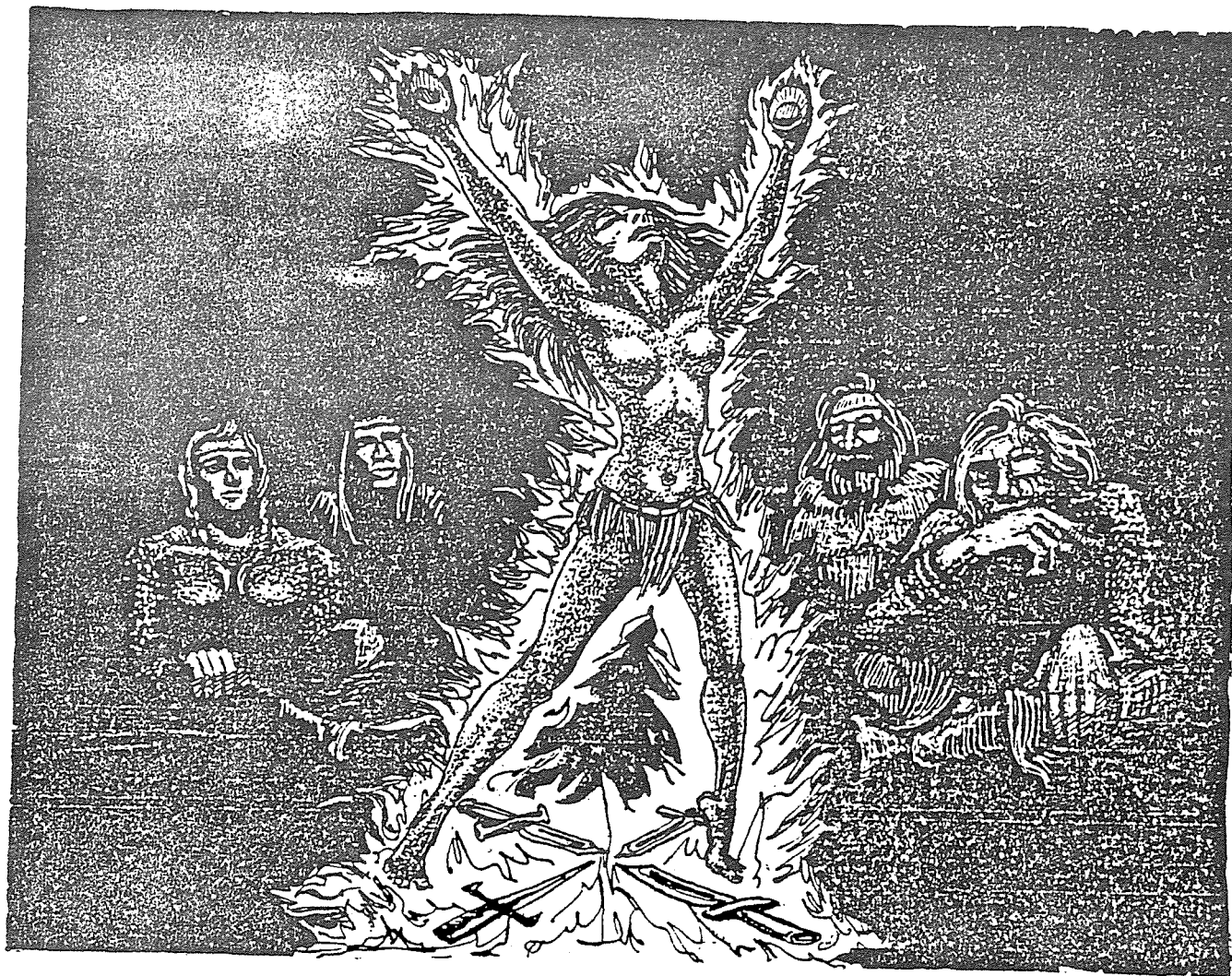
Dianae sumus in fide
Puellae et pueri integri;
Dianam pueri integri
Puellaeque canamus.

"Great Tonka, that's Catullus' 'Hymn to Diana!'" John Yellowhorse whispered ecstatically. "Do you know how many thousand years old that is? Where did they find that one? And the silver body-paint - silver and white are moon colors, as with the 'White-Painted Lady' of the Plains Indians...."

Kirk wasn't listening. His whole attention was absorbed in watching Quannechota dance. Slowly, calmly, in rhythm with the song, she stepped from space to space between the blades, swinging the fire-cups in a smooth figure-eight under her arm and outward and over her head and back to its original position - first with one cup, then with the other, then with both at the same time - without spilling a drop of the flaming liquid. The pattern and motion of her dance was as precise, smooth and complex as the orbiting of planets, and the flickering blue flames lit shifting planes against the rising and falling muscles under her silvered skin and flashed from the razor-edges of the waiting, untouched knives.

Moon goddess, sky-goddess, Kirk thought, fascinated. Beautiful, unearthly, inhumanly precise - like the turning of the galactic wheel, moving the stars in their courses.... As he watched, the walls seemed to fade away and leave her dancing on a floor of stars, swinging blue suns in her hands, and visible by no other light. Time was measurable only by the changing of the multi-toned words, and by the sinking of the fire in the cups. At last the voices caught the terminal note and held it long. The Moon-Dancer swept the fire-cups high above

her head, at the ends of her straight-stretched arms, and then tilted them. The burning liquid spilled out, down her arms, over her body, down her legs and feet to the floor, still burning. For a moment she stood wrapped in blue flames - a living column of fire, a naked goddess in the heart of a nova - and then the flames flickered and leaped and sank, and abruptly went out.



The burning after-image hung in his vision. Kirk rubbed his eye, trying to hasten it back to normal, but when he could see clearly again Quannechota was gone. Nothing remained except the four knives on the floor, and a faint scorch-mark between them. Did I really see all that? he wondered, feeling definitely weird. Was she even there at all? He watched as the Anarchists came and picked up their daggers, noticed that the colors of their shirts seemed too bright to be real, and wondered just how much beer he'd put down. Behind him, John Yellowhorse was scribbling furiously. Chekov was gibbering frantically in Russian. Scotty was mumbling, "...tisna alcohol. Carbon disulfide, or some domned thing...low burnin' point...would have ta be...Och, ma tongue feels funny. Wha's wrong wi' the light?"

Kirk puzzled over that; he couldn't see anything wrong with the lights. Sparks had turned them back up a little, and he could see quite well. If anything, there was something wrong with the Anarchists' clothes; the colors were much too bright for the amount of light they were getting, much too raw and primal. In fact, it wasn't just the clothes - hair and faces were impossibly bright-lit too. Was there really something wrong with the lights? Or was there something wrong with Scotty - and himself, too? Light's wrong, sounds too loud, sense of touch much sharper.... What's happening? This isn't like being drunk. What was in that punch? Jenneth....

But he had no chance to ask Roantree anything; she was playing the 12-string again, this time a fierce, lively dance-tune. The other Anarchists were getting to their feet and forming a line. Sparks and Bailey came up laughing and lifted Kirk to his feet, and pulled him into the line of dancers. What now? he wondered dizzily. What am I supposed to do? He turned to look for John Yellowhorse, hoping for advice, but then Quannechota was standing before him, still dressed in her silver paint, and he forgot to look anywhere else. She smiled and took his left hand and held out a wreath of gold-colored leaves. "What am I supposed to do with this?" he asked, taking it. How bright the leaves are.... Oak leaves? Acorns on the stems....

"If you are the Sun-Hero," she said, her voice sliding subtly into a formal rhythm, "if you are my true mate, and if you are willing, put it on. Are you the one to do so?"

"I damn well hope I am," Kirk replied jauntily, settling the wreath on his head. It fit surprisingly well. Like a crown...but that doesn't seem very Anarchistic....

John Yellowhorse squeaked in horrified recognition. Scott gave him a puzzled look.

Chekov whispered, "I somehow don't think that was a very good idea.... Why should Enarchists put a crown on someone?"

"Sacred King," John Yellowhorse mumbled, taking frantic notes. "Makes very good sense. They only crown a head that's doomed to roll!"

"What!?"

Three of the women carried the now-cleared serving-table into the middle of the circle. Across it they spread a dead-black cloth with a gold sunburst in the middle, and at one end they piled another cloth - this one dyed and painted in odd stipples and streaks that, to Kirk's bemused vision, resembled the fur of a shaggy animal. Perhaps a bear, he thought. The fierce, bouncing tune grew louder, tickling his feet into motion that he knew he could manage, brace and all. Quannechota tugged at his hand in signal. He turned to her and smiled, took the hand of the next dancer in line, and let his Moon-Goddess lead him through the slow twining steps of the Sun-Snake. Behind him, Roantree sang another verse.

He's chased the red deer him before, and the doe down by the glen.
The fattest buck in all the herd, King Henry he has slain.
His huntsmen followed him to the hall to make them burly cheer,
When loud the wind was heard to knock and an earthquake shook the floor.

"Oh, oh," John Yellowhorse muttered, trying to keep his notes legible; the stylus had developed a disturbing tendency to slither out of his hand. "Oh, oh, I think I know that song!"

Then darkness covered all the hall where they sat at their meat.
The greyhounds whined and left their food and crept to Henry's feet.
Then loud the wind howled round the hall, and burst the bars and door,
And in there came a grisly fiend, stamping on the floor.

"That's not a very cheerful song," Chekov complained, trying to keep track of the Captain through air that hovered strangely. "And what did you mean about heads rolling?" He didn't know if he should worry about that or not; the song didn't seem to bother the Captain, or else he wasn't listening to the words, as he followed the silver-and-black woman, leading the line of dancers in an ever-tightening spiral around the central table.

Her head hit the roof-tree of the house, her middle you could not span.
The frightened huntsmen fled the hall and left the king alone.
Her teeth were long as picket-stakes, her eyes deep as a well,
And nothing less she seemed to be than a fiend come straight from Hell.

"I think I know your story...." mumbled Scott, his voice working at half normal speed. "Doesn't she demand three gifts of him? Food and drink and...uh...." He got no answer; John Yellowhorse was concentrating furiously on his notes.

"I know that story too...." Chekov raised a wobbling finger under Scott's nose. "It's based on a Russian folk-tale. She's rilly an Elf-Quinn, and she makes the king kill his hawks and hounds and war-horse for her, and then she itts them up."

"Sacrificial animals," Yellowhorse explained, scrambling for his dropped stylus. "Originally...ah, at first she was something more than just the Queen of the Elves. The last thing she demands of him is the real giveawayway...give...away...."

"I'm tryin' ta remember...." said Scott, watching the dancing circle tighten around the table. As if he were an altar-stone on the moors... What do yon heathens have in mind? There's no hounds nor horse nor any other sacrificial beast hereabouts, and the feast is long done.... No beast nor feast. No feastie-beastie. What the hell was in that punch? "The last thing she demands...demands...last thing...."

"Cast off your cloak now, King Henry, and lie down by my side,
And swear to me now, King Henry, to take me as your bride."
"O God forbid," King Henry said, "That ever the like betide -
That ever a fiend that comes from hell should lie down by my side!"

"Oh, are they goingk to do that, too?" Chekov whispered. "Right there in front of eferybody? Oh, the poor Keptain!"

"Och, shame, lad! What a dirty mind ye've got!" Scott admonished, craning his neck to see better.

When the night was done and the day had come and the sun shone through the hall,
The fairest lady that ever was seen lay between him and the wall.
"I've met with many a knight," she said, "Who gave me such a fill,
But never before with a courteous knight who gave me all my will."

"Of course," breathed John Yellowhorse, scribbling illegible doodles on his note-pad. "It's an old t-tale of wininining magical powers by gaining the goddess' favor.... This goddamn stylus is trying to escape..."

The song stopped abruptly, leaving Kirk and Quannechota facing each other beside the table in the center of the spiral of dancers, all standing suddenly still. Caught off-balance, he staggered a little and clutched Quannechota's arms. The floor was unsteady beneath him, and everything was dreamlike and wavering, and he had no idea what he was supposed to do next. He gave Quannechota a nervous look as he righted himself, and was relieved to see her smile back at him.

Outside the circle, Roantree put down her 12-string, picked up a small cloth-wrapped bundle and opened it. She got to her feet and walked up the standing spiral of dancers, handing white candles from the bundle to every person she passed, until she reached the central table. There she handed a different object to Quannechota - a short dagger with a thick handle, polished silvery-white. She took out the last item, a common laboratory-model flint-and-steel lighter, lit it to flame, and held the fire to the nearest candle. She walked back out of the circle, lighting each candle as she passed, then went to the light-controls on the wall and turned down the overhead lights to almost nothing.

"Candles on a starship! Hoo ridiculous can ye get?" Scott grumbled quietly, trying to ignore the undeniably eerie effect of that spiral of small flames against the backdrop of darkness. He couldn't help noticing how much the pattern resembled a galactic whorl.

"Are you the one who comes in the name of the Sun?" In the close silence, Quannechota's quiet voice could be heard quite easily.

I'm supposed to answer yes to all questions, Kirk remembered. "Yes," he said. Think.... The sun, science worshippers.... My ship, Federation science. Yes, I did come in the name of that.

"Do you hold the mind to be a thing of value?" she continued.

"Yes," How could anyone say no to that?

"Do you hold that the use of the mind is a good thing?"

"Yes." Same question.... Or is it? 'Use of the mind' ...Science? Progress? There are some who would say no to that.... But not me!

"Would you see the light of that Sun spread over the world?"

"Yes." Science restored? Damn right, I would!

"Would you give all that you have for that?"

"Yes." What the hell, I've given most of what I have already!

"Would you give even your life to let that Sun shine on?"

"Yes!" Yes! I've been losing pieces of my life ever since I got here - why not the whole thing? Why not? Just let me drag myself through the Guardian, go back, stop Pennington, set time right, and I don't care if I die in the next minute! "Let it be done!" Omigod, did I say that out loud? What will they do?

Quannechota raised one night-black eyebrow. "Let it be done indeed," she said. She stepped forward and kissed him, first on his good eye and then on the patch over his blind one, and whispered in his ear, "Fear nothing."

I won't, he thought. I've been through just about everything; there's nothing left to fear but failing my task....

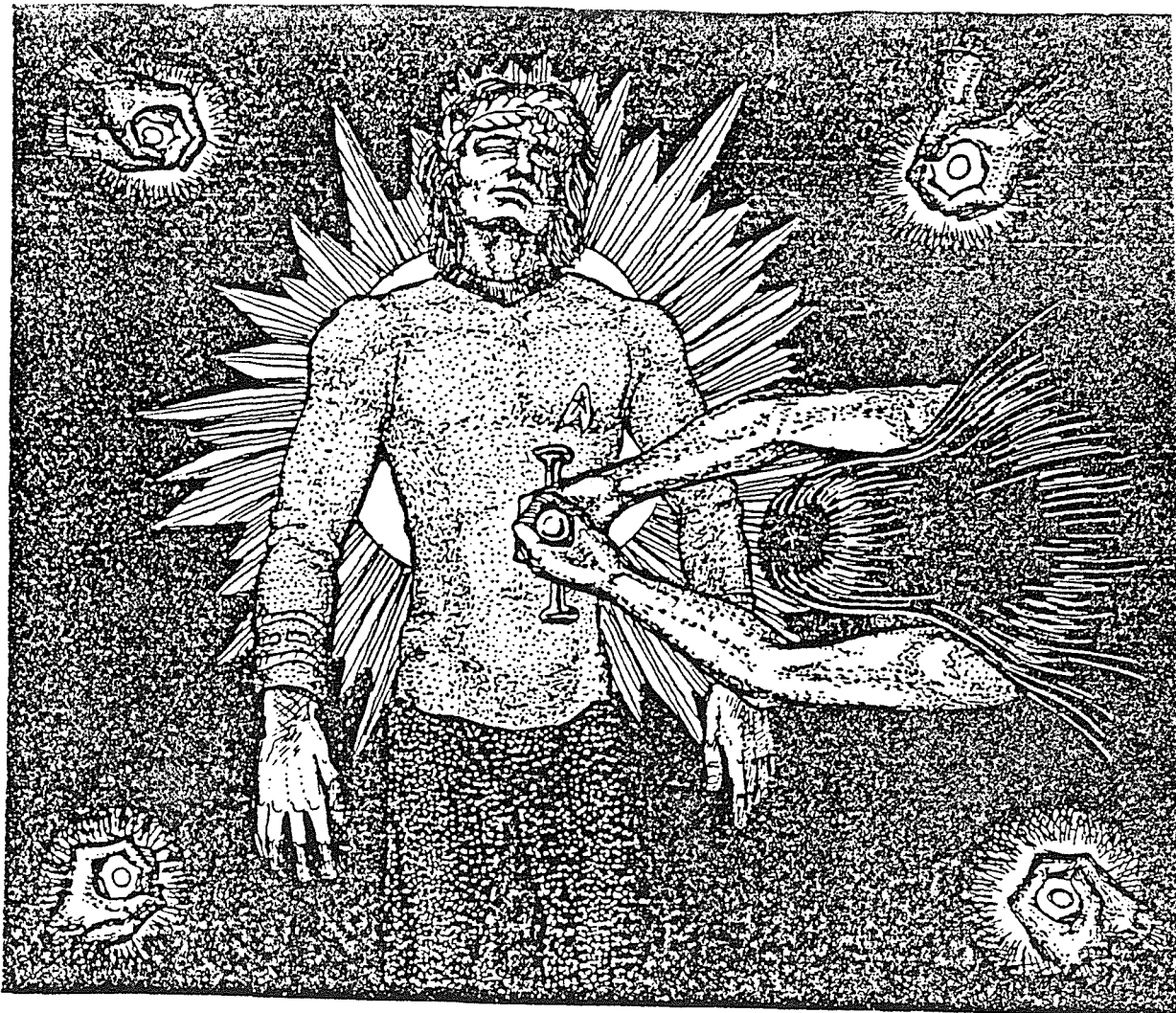
Hands tugged him gently downward, and he found himself lying on the flag-draped table with no clear recollection of how he got there. He could feel the smooth stitching of the gold sunburst under his shoulders and the rough black cloth under his hands, but his sense of gravity had gone strange, and it seemed that he wasn't lying flat at all but standing in the weightless dark of space with a gold-burning star at his back. Something bizarre had happened to his vision; he saw everything in stark, primary colors, overlaid with transparent moving, shifting, intricate geometric patterns. All things were surrounded by vibrating haloes in all the colors of the rainbow, and the flickering candles were ranks of stars that spiralled around him like the wheel of the galaxy with himself on the star at its center. He could feel the presence of minds behind those stars, all watching him, all waiting for some vast change. Almost like a mind-link, he recognized the sensation. I'm drifting loose in the mental universe. I could get lost here! ...No, they won't let that happen. 'Fear nothing.' Jenneth, am I doing it right?

Yes, came an answering thought from some unimaginable distance. All's well. Flow with the current. Resist nothing, but let it happen. Your life will buy the sun.

Reassured, he looked ahead. His eye registered a silver shape, a woman carved of starlight, standing or floating at an angle from him, raising something in her hands - something silver, with light glinting along its edge. It was a dagger. It looks like my Andorian dagger, the one Scotty took away.... I was going to.... She's going to - Oh my God, not now! Not before I get everything done! No! Quanna, please....

Fear nothing, the voice whispered in his skull, all of them solemn but none of them sad, their vast reassurance pressing down on him like a ton of feathers. One of the voices was Roantree's. He remembered how she'd fought for him at the competency hearing, how she'd saved him afterwards, and realized that whatever strange plans she had for him, destruction was not - could not be - one of them. 'Fear nothing.' ...set time right... 'buy the Sun.' Yes, I accept. He relaxed, feeling the moment's terror drain away, and smiled up at Quannechota and the poised dagger.

Scott and Chekov gaped at the scene in wild-eyed horror. "No!" Chekov whispered. "Those sefages are going to kill him!" Scott started to clamber unsteadily to his feet. John Yellowhorse whipped out a hand and stopped



him. "No!" he hissed. "Sit down! Down! Downdown! There are more than forty of them - they'll tear you to pieces before you can get anywhere nearnearnear him..."

"But I've got ta do somethin' before those bloody heathens knife him! If I could reach the intercom..."

"You can't! The Ishmael...Outrider...Damn! Roantree's standing there by the wall, and she isn't doped up like us, and she's got a knife of h-her own, and you'd never get past her, and be-besides they're not-notnot going to hurt him!"

"Are ye daft?! Look!"

"It's a play, remember? Play! N-now sit still and keep quiet, or you reallyreally will get s-someone killed!"

"But..."

"Take up these sorrows," Quannechota began to chant, the other Anarchists following her. "Take up these burdens. Take up the wars and pains and furies of the year. Take them up like straws. Bind those straws into a single rope. Tie that binding nine times around the husk of the passing year. Cast off that husk and fling it to the fire. Grief, pain, despair, fear, and fury - go with the Old Year!"

And she drove the dagger down, straight into the insignia on Kirk's gold shirt.

"No!" Scott cried from the shadows.

Kirk felt the impact jar through him, driving the breath out of his lungs, thudding through his bones - but strangely there was no pain. Something dark slid up over his vision, blotting out the swirling lights,

but he could still feel the minds behind them. A high, wordless singing filled his ears. The shifting geometric patterns danced bright before his sight. The darkness lay soft and heavy over his face, and he was vaguely surprised that he could feel it. There was an odd sense of drifting, expanding, somewhat like the memory of those hours before he had wakened in Sickbay, but this time awareness was full on him. He could observe, and think, and wonder about this strange and featureless place.

Is this what it's like to be dead? he pondered. If so, then at least I can't be alone here....

He let himself expand a little further, reaching for the others that he knew were there. They were waiting for him, eager and calm at the same time, their joined purpose pulling at him like a steady tide. He let himself ride with it, spinning through thought-shot darkness, as the tide took on a rhythm, then a solemn melody, and finally oddly-accented words.

This aye neet, this aye neet, every neet and all,
Fire and sleet and candle'leet, and Dis receive thy soul.

Somewhere outside the circle of minds and the rolling tide of voices, off by itself in the darkness, another voice moaned and cried in a familiar tone, "Ma God, yon's the 'Lyke Wake Dirge!' And wi' the old, old words. I always knew there was somethin' horrid about thot song.... Oh, the bloody heathens!"

Kirk laughed silently, gently, at the fading voice; poor thing, he didn't realize that there was nothing to worry about, nothing horrid about the Dirge - it was meant to be a help, a guide through this strange dimension.

When from hence thou art past, every neet and all.
To Winny-Moor thou come'st at last, and Dis receive thy soul.

What's a 'winny?' Kirk wondered vaguely, letting the song carry him forward. Faint banners of light and color, not exactly visual, streaked before him, overlaying the fading geometric visions. Like growing mist, they thickened, solidified, became fragments of scenes, images like brief memories, like fleeting relections in shards of a broken mirror. He plunged into them without controls, striking them at random, falling from one to another with never quite time enough to see everything clearly, just enough to pick up swift sharp impressions.

He remembered the first day he had come aboard the Enterprise, after the tedious and itchy formalities were done, when he'd first sat down in the command-chair and looked around the bridge, and realized fully that this great silver star-eagle was all his own. How I gloated! All that speed and beauty and power, all mine! Ecstatic as an impatient lover finally wrapping his arms around his sweetheart's body.... That night, when I bedded that silly, half-drunken little yeoman, it wasn't her face I saw under me, but a mask of silver and fire....

He remembered an hour when he'd heard, understood, been made to accept the fact that his father was dead, and would never come home again. No! No! ...I wanted to scream it. So horribly unfair! I'd had so little time with him, and now I'd be alone, and all the other boys had fathers, but not me.... And he never did get the one thing he wanted so much.... A ship of his own....

He remembered, somehow certain that it was his own memory, even though that was impossible, being a soldier - a common foot-soldier, a boy of eighteen named Heinrich something-or-other, and choking to death - drowning in his own blood and the deep mud of a trench, while shells screamed overhead. I could have lived! I could have been saved! But nobody noticed me.... They were all too busy following the General as he beat a hasty retreat.... I couldn't draw breath to shout at them, and my last image of life was an agony of betrayal....

He remembered the hot sun of Palestine roasting him in his heavy armor as he plodded, lance ready, toward the waiting mass of Saladin's lines. Of course God was on our side, but.... Lion-Heart, this was an idiotic plan of attack! Why didn't God inspire you better?

He remembered being Julius Caesar, and realized that there was some vast flaw somewhere in his thinking, even as he saw the men running toward him with the knives. How did I survive so many battles, only to come

home and die in peacetime? What was it I failed to see?

He remembered more, and more, fragments out of time, and in each of them - on land or sea or sky - he was always a soldier, and always making the same obscure mistake.

If ever thou gave'st meat or drink, every nest and all,
The fires shall never make thee shrink, and Dis receive thy soul.

There was a zone of shifting light, like the galactic barrier, like a curtain of fire, that gave way like mist before him. Beyond it the pattern of shifting images changed, became more fluid still, and faster, less comprehensible.

He saw himself back on the bridge, at the con, and his friends were alive again, and Spock was standing by his shoulder as always. Spock! he wanted to cry to him. You were dead, and I was broken, and I never told you.... And then that strong slender hand was resting warm against his face, and the silent words came through the touch: I know, Jim. I always knew.

Then he was watching the viewscreen, seeing another ship approach. It was a Destroyer-class ship with odd and non-regulation attachments welded on from the cannibalized bodies of other ships, and he knew that Jenneth Roantree was her Captain, and the thought enraged him. Damn you, Jenneth! Must you surpass me at everything? You start worse and finish better. What's left for me?

Then he was looking into the smiling blue face of an Andorian woman, and she was holding three fat and wriggling blue babies - all with pale blond hair, with ears as well as antennae, and his own hazel eyes. That's impossible, he thought. Humans and Andorians can't interbreed....

Other images crowded close, scenes of incomprehensible happiness and pain, all of them strange and bright and impossible.

If ever thou gave'st silver or gold, every neet and all,
On Brig o' Dread thou'lt find foothold, and Dis receive thy soul.

The images blew away like fog, leaving only the sight of an impossibly long, narrow bridge - dark stone glinting under starlight - across an endless gulf. Gave what, he puzzled as he drifted toward the bridge. Not literally minerals or money, like the crystals.... What did Jenneth say? Silver: the moon...the heart, passions, love of freedom especially. Gold for the sun...their Sun: the mind, science. Freedom? Knowledge? Did I ever give those things? His memory was roiled and opaque; he couldn't be sure.

If gold or silver thou ne'er gave'st nane, every neet and all,
Down thou'lt fall 'til stare be gane, and Dis receive thy soul.

The stone bridge crumbled soundlessly under him. He fell, or drifted, down into darkness as empty and endless as the sealed universe beyond the Tholian web. There was no time here, no light, no motion, nothing. There was no fear, either; he recognized this place.

Back in the silence, where I started.... So quiet and peaceful...empty...no pain.... Like a dark sea...Oblivion. But was this what I really wanted? No pain here, but no pleasure either...and I'll miss that. Hey, nobody ever told me that death could be boring! Well, it is. I want out. Call me back to life again. Call me home! Now!

"Rise up, new-born Sun!" called a voice.

On the words, the darkness whipped away from him. Light stabbed his eye. Hands pulled, defining his arms, dragging him upright. His vision reeled, cleared, and showed him the circle of cheering, shouting, singing Anarchists, their high-held candles outshining the glow of the overhead lights. Closest of them was Quannechota, smiling as she pulled him to his feet and helped him find his balance. One by one the others came up to him

and hugged him, their solid embraces reminding him of where his body was. He endured it breathlessly, and leaned on Quannechota when she led him back down the spiral of cheering celebrants, all the way back to the piled cushions.

As he sprawled gratefully on the tumbled pillows, feeling his wreath fall off, he happened to glance up and see the unforgettable sight of Scott and Chekov clutching each other like badly-scared children, staring at him as if they'd seen a ghost. He smiled and waved.

"C-captain? Ye're really alive?" Scott almost gibbered. "I saw the knife go in...."

Kirk glanced down at his shirt. There was no blood on it, no rip in the cloth, and the insignia was as bright as ever. "It didn't really hurt," he puzzled. "Quannechota...how did you do that?"

She smiled faintly, held up the dagger and showed him how the blade pushed back into the handle. He laughed. "Stage knife! It couldn't hurt a fly. But convincing...."

"Too bloody convincing!" Scott started to complain, but just then somebody tugged his arm. He looked up and saw Ann Bailey, her jumpsuit open and her hair hanging loose as a steel rain around her shoulders, and a broadly lecherous grin on her face. "Och, no...." Scott moaned, even as he climbed unsteadily to his feet. "This isna exactly what I had in mind...." His muttering died away as Bailey steered him into a darker corner.

"Eh, I'd better be goingk...." Chekov apologized, trying to haul himself upright. Before, he could manage it, three chuckling women of assorted shapes, sizes and ages converged on him. He tried to refuse gracefully, but momentarily forgot how to speak anything but Russian. The women took him by the arms, laughed fiercely, and dragged him away. His expression was dismayed, but he didn't struggle very hard.

A snore sounded gently from the near bulkhead. Kirk turned his head and saw that the snore belonged to John Yellowhorse, who was propped against the bulkhead, having finally given up trying to use his stylus and pad. The pad lay nearby, its last page covered with meandering scribbles.

"No trouble from that quarter," Kirk chuckled, as Quannechota sat down beside him and settled his head in her lap. "Where's Jenneth?"

"Quannechota pointed silently, and Kirk looked and saw Sparks - all twinkling eyes and merry grin and thick beard, looking like a son of Santa Claus - carrying a relaxed and smiling Jenneth Roantree away in his arms. He wished them luck and a well-cushioned corner, noticing how quickly the candles were being put out in the room all around them.

"I never would have guessed that the orgy is an anticlimax," he laughed. "No wonder...after all that. Quanna, what was in the punch?"

"Fly Agaric, also called Amanita Muscaria - among other things."

"Amazing stuff. Is this the end of the Yule celebration?" he asked, basking in the feel of her hands sliding through his hair. "I'd like to give you a... Yule present."

"We give the gifts tomorrow," she said, running her fingers gently over his face, noting carefully how much of the tension under the skin had vanished. "Do you still wish to be dead?"

Surprisingly, the question didn't surprise him. "No," he said. "Now that I've had a glimpse of death, I really do prefer life...even if I'm permanently maimed, even if I never get it all back." He turned his head and rested his cheek against the smooth skin of her silvered thigh, marvelling at how good it was to be alive, to have a body, to be able to move and think and feel. "Quanna, is this why you didn't tell me what the festival was about? You wanted me to believe it, really think I was dying, burn out the last of my...my death-wish, didn't you?"

"Yes." Quannechota smiled again, and began unfastening his shirt. "There is a difference between choosing not to die and wishing to live."

"So there is...." He wriggled delightedly as her hands skimmed over his bare chest. The deadly numbness was gone as if it had never been; in fact, he couldn't remember the last time he'd felt this sensitive, aware and alive. The motion of her fingers was different this time, not steady and probing and relaxing, but light and flickering and teasing. Most of the candles were out now, and the room was almost completely dark. Someone had put a tape on the intercom, wordless flute and tambour music that almost covered the soft sea-sound of breathing in the shadowed twilight around them. Kirk laughed again as he felt Quannechota's hands unfasten his belt and drag the cloth away from him. The sweet dizziness and sensitivity were stirring him fiercely. He slipped his arms around her and pulled her down beside him on the cushions, and covered her face with slow kisses, and explored her body as gently and thoroughly as if it were the very first time, as shameless and happy and drunk with life as all the other pagans.

* * * * *

Captain's Log, Stardate 6118.9.

OH, BUT THAT WAS ONE HELL OF A PARTY! I DON'T THINK ANY OF US GOT TO WORK BEFORE 1200, AND WE ALL HAD PITIFUL HANGOVERS, AND I WAS SMEARED ALL OVER WITH QUANNA'S SILVER PAINT, AND SCOTTY AND CHEKOV KEEP GIVING ME ODD LOOKS. I'M STILL TRYING TO SORT OUT WHICH OF THAT WAS REAL AND WHICH WAS THE EFFECT OF THE FUNNY-FRUIT PUNCH. DID I REALLY DO THAT?

WELL, SO MUCH FOR THE SPECIAL SOLSTICE FESTIVAL: THE GENERAL EVERYBODY-WELCOME PARTY IS TONIGHT, AND WE'RE CELEBRATING IT JOINTLY WITH THE GROUND SETTLEMENT AND THE CANNIBAL WHEEL, THANKS TO UHURA'S NEAT THREE-WAY TIE-IN. THE ANARCHISTS EITHER TALKED KYLE INTO PULLING A SPECTACULAR STUNT WITH THE TRANSPORTER, OR ELSE THEY FIGURED IT OUT THEMSELVES, BUT WE NOW HAVE A REAL LIVE PINE TREE IN REC ROOM #3. WHEN I CAME IN, THE SNOW WAS STILL ON IT! ALL DAY LONG I'VE BEEN BUMPING INTO PEOPLE - REGULAR CREW AND ANARCHISTS ALIKE - RUNNING AROUND WITH IMPROVISED TREE-TRIMMINGS AND GIFT-WRAPPINGS AND PRESENTS, AND SINGING SNATCHES OF CAROLS. THAT REMINDS ME, I'D BETTER GET SCOTTY'S HELP IN MAKING QUANNA'S PRESENT, AND JENNETH'S.

ULTIMATELY, THOUGH, OUR BEST PRESENT WILL BE OUR DEPARTURE. THE SHIP IS CHECKED OUT FROM STEM TO STERN, AND TOMORROW WE SET OUT FOR THE GUARDIAN. WITH LUCK, WE'LL MAKE IT IN TWO MONTHS - ASSUMING MAXIMUM SAFE SPEED AND NO INTERRUPTIONS. NOBODY KNOWS WHAT WE'LL FIND OUT THERE, AND WE MUSTN'T LET ANYTHING STOP US.

* * * * *

The party began in Rec Room #3 and soon spilled over into the corridors. Roantree played a round of carols, all secular, some familiar and some amazingly obscure, and then led a circle-dance around the ornament-loaded tree while Sparks fed a tape of seasonal songs into the intercom and projected a view of deep space onto the widest bulkhead. Scott dropped in briefly, sampled the eggnog - only after making sure that the Anarchists hadn't put anything but brandy in it - shyly shoved a wrapped gift into Kirk's hands, and fled back to the bridge. Kirk opened the present and found that it was Scotty's beloved old silver whiskey-flask, with his name followed by the newly engraved words: "To Captain James T. Kirk - the Best in the Galaxy." Inside the flask was the last of Scotty's whiskey.

"Why so pensive, Jim" Roantree asked, padding up behind him with her hands behind her back.

"I'm just thinking of how valuable friendship is," he said hitching the flask to his belt and settling his shirt over it. "What surprise are you going to spring on me this time?"

"A pleasant one, I hope." She brought out a small oblong package and tucked it into his hands. "Season's best, Jim. I hope you like it."

Kirk peeled off the wrappings and opened the little box, and stared bewildered at the contents. Inside lay nothing but an old-fashioned fountain-pen, made of dull gray metal and considerably battered. "Oh. How nice," he mumbled, wondering what on Earth this meant, and trying to think of something complimentary to say. "It's...pretty. What's it made of?"

"Refined steel, the same sort that went into the Sunfire's hull. It was meant to last for generations. Look at the inscription on the shaft."

Intrigued, Kirk turned the pen until he could see the engraved words: GEORGE T. KIRK. He understood. For a moment his vision blurred. "This belonged to...."

"My father," she agreed. "Your father too, now that you're here. It was supposed to go to the oldest son, and it went to Sam first, but he left it with me when he went off to Denver. By rights, it's yours now. Not much of an heirloom, I'm afraid, but I couldn't carry much with me on the Sunfire. Use it in good health."

Kirk put an arm around her and hugged her in genuine affection. "Thanks, Jen," he said. Someday you've got to tell me about my father in this time-line, and I'll tell you about yours in mine. "Wait, I have one for you, too." He ducked through the ring of dancers, rummaged in the pile around the tree, and returned with a small flat package. He handed it to her and stepped back to watch her face as she opened it.

"Strings...." Roantree whispered in delight. "New guitar strings; a full set. But so light...."

"Iridium-compound," Kirk explained. "One of the engineers is an instrument-maker in his off hours, and he whipped those up specially for the occasion. They should last for years, even with hard playing. I have no idea what they sound like, but he said they were the best."

"Let's try them!" She kissed his cheek and hurried off to find her 12-string.

Kirk smiled after her, took another cup of eggnog, and thoughtfully examined the old steel pen. A memory drifted into his mind, a bright image painted in warm tones of love and pride. He was standing by the big oak table in the dining-room, looking up from a small child's perspective, watching his father write important words in a big notebook, seeing him stop and look down and notice him, and then smile and rest a big strong hand on his shoulder, and say "It's getting closer, Jenny. Someday we'll go to the stars."

...Jenny? Wait a minute. That's not my name. This isn't my memory! Let me out!

"Citizen Kirk?" A well-known voice drew him away from his thoughts. "My shift has ended and I am free to stay awhile. Are you enjoying the festivities?"

"Oh yes." Kirk smiled, hooked the pen on his belt beside the whiskey-flask, and forgot about it. "I always did like the ship's celebrations at this time of the year. A touch of home away from home, as they say. Come with me, Quanna." He stood up and took her arm. "Let's go sit under the tree and look at the stars. I have a present for you."

"And I for you." She showed him the long package she was carrying, as they dodged through the crowd and settled under the resinous tree. Kirk held up a restraining hand, rummaged through the pile of presents until he found the one meant for her, and carefully gave her his gift first. Quannechota neatly stripped off the ribbon and paper, and her eyes widened as the gift was revealed. It was a tall silver cup, chased with a sunburst on one side and a crescent moon on the other, and lined with glittering bright red enamel. She held it up to the light and studied the carving, clearly impressed.

"It's a Lovers' Cup," Kirk explained almost shyly. "An old custom from my part of the world. It's for special occasions, and...for only the two of us." An old custom, and a really obscure one. I don't know where I thought of it, but it's a lovely idea. Do you like it?"

"Oh yes," she said, setting it almost reverently in her lap. "Here, now. My gift to you. Nothing so fine, I think, but a gesture of a certain trust."

Kirk peeled the paper off the long package and blinked in surprise at what he found. It was, of all things, a shotgun. It was short-barrelled and pump-actioned and accompanied by a cleaning kit and a large bag of shells, and it was sleek and lovely and wicked-looking, and it was the last thing he would have expected. He gave Quannechota a grateful, but puzzled, look.

"You do not comprehend?" She seemed surprised. "How strange. Or perhaps in your country it is a different weapon.... Well, here it is our custom to always go about armed: it is our proof that we are Free People, capable



of defending and feeding ourselves. The very least one may properly carry is a knife, and most commonly we carry shotguns because of their versatility. I do not mean to insult you or cause you pain by saying this, but even a completely blind man can be taught to use a shotgun. This gift is meant to assure you the means of defending your life, freedom, and people."

"I see." Not so many decades ago, Academy graduates wore ritual swords. Same thing, sort of.... For a ritual weapon, it's in awfully good working order. "Wait a minute. Quanna, does this mean that your people are making me an honorary...Citizen? I thought they just called me that to be polite! Am I completely accepted?"

"You are, as you have said, our Co-ordinator's brother. You have given us priceless gifts of knowledge. You have shown us the gate that opens on Paradise. How could we do less?"

Kirk reached for Quannechota and hugged her very hard. He didn't let go until the shotgun began to jab him painfully. "Thank you, thank you!" his words tumbled over each other. "It's beautiful. Imagine, a working antique for a membership card! Amazing. Yes, I'll find a good place on the wall to mount it. Where on Earth did you get it? Does it have a history, or was it made specially for me?"

"We made it for you, in the ship's armory work-shop, when we made the others."

"Others? What others?"

"Why, shotguns for all of us." Quannechota seemed a bit surprised. "Surely you did not think we took our family guns with us to the moon! We could not afford the extra weight, and what use is such a weapon in a vacuum?"

"Oh, of course. But...all of you?" Kirk worried. "Why are your people all arming themselves with shotguns? And why now?"

"We will need them when we go through the Guardian of Forever, and we must have time to resume practice. We do not mean to let Judas Pennington escape us."

"Wait! Wait a minute! You mean you're all planning to go through the Guardian? All forty-two of you?"

"Certainly you did not think any of us wished to be left behind? No, we will all go together."

"And when you find Pennington you mean to kill her? With your...ritual weapons?"

"If necessary. We mean to be absolutely sure that she does not escape."

Bloody savages! Kirk shuddered. And yet...I can understand it. God knows, I'd like to blow Pennington's head off myself! "Now Quanna, we're a long way from the Guardian, and we haven't yet decided who's going to be on the landing-party, or exactly how we're going to stop Pennington - if we can get to 1990 Chicago at all, so it's a bit premature to insist on doing it this way. Besides, we have enough Security personnel...er, trained warriors among the Enterprise's crew to catch her, so your people won't have to...."

"Nonsense," Quannechota pronounced firmly. "I do not know what your people have decided, since they do not seem to have regular meeting hours as we do, but we have discussed this many times and we are all agreed. If the Guardian will give us passage to Chicago, we shall all go together and hunt this Judas Pennington as if she were a wild pig. If the Guardian will only allow us to reach the moon-people, we shall all go together there, too. Your people and your records agree that the Guardian's ways and powers are incomprehensible; we do not know what will happen to any who are left outside, and since it is our universe that we mean to change, we insist that we shall go - and not one of us will be left behind."

"Uh, I see your point...." Kirk rubbed his jaw, wondering how he could explain this to Scotty. Do they really have this preogative? Can Scotty - or anybody - give any really convincing argument against them? They want to kill Pennington, but the punishment for gross and damaging violation of the Prime Directive is death, anyway. They want to go into our time-line...but haven't they earned the right? Technically, we should send a Security team...but the Anarchists are part of our crew now, and we're short on Security personnel, and these are all trained fighters. I don't see how Scotty is going to refuse them. And what will happen if he tries? They just might kill him! I'd better to talk with him, and fast.

Just then his attention was snagged by a chorus of shouts. A group of Anarchists came into the rec-room, rolling with them a thing that looked like a giant cartwheel of tarnished metal mesh. "Braider! Braider!" the cheerful voices called. "Good Yule! Here's your present! Your present from all of us! Good Yule!"

Roantree put down her 12-string, stood up and walked slowly to the tarnished metal wheel, an awed look on her face. "For me?" she whispered. "You're giving me the jet-grill?"

"For you Braider," Sparks explained, grinning. "Your share of the ship. After all, if it hadn't been for you, none of us would have come out of this alive."

Roantree stretched out a hand to touch the grill, her eyes bright with pride and understanding and gratitude.

And just then the Red Alert began to whoop.

"Battle stations!" Kirk shouted automatically, scrambling to his feet. The celebrants looked at each other, promptly put their drinks and presents down, and scattered neatly and fast. As Kirk raced for the turbolift, Roantree and Quannechota caught up to him. They said nothing until the lift doors opened and let them spill out onto the bridge. Quannechota slipped into her post at the computer console and Roantree into the assistant-navigator's chair beside her, as smoothly as if they'd been doing it all their lives. Scott turned and grinned with relief as he saw Kirk, started to get up, then remembered himself and sat back down as Kirk took his place at the Engineering console.

"Cap...Sir, 'tis yon sensor-ghost," he explained. "She's come back wi' a vengeance, and wi' speed. Look."

He pointed to the screen as Uhura obligingly upped the magnification. Against the star-shot darkness appeared a ship, then several ships, a whole fleet of them, and there was no mistaking the design.

"Romulan war-birds, Sir. Dozens of 'em, and comin' straight toward Earth. They're movin' fast, and should arrive wi'in minutes. 'Tis clear they've checked oot this system before; they must ha' be inspectin' Earth for months, plannin' ta invade."

"And Earth has nothing to stop them," Roantree spoke up. "So now our Luddite neighbors will learn what happens when one turns one's back on progress."

"But how did they get this far into the galaxy?" Chekov burst out. "They should be seferal parsecs away, behind the.... Oh."

"Right," Kirk replied grimly. "In this time-line there was no Federation to stop them. They've been pushing out beyond the Neutral Zone borders for more than a hundred years."

"How soon before they reach Earth?" Roantree asked, tension roughening her voice to an eerily exact imitation of Kirk's.

"Four minutes, 37 seconds," Quannechota replied.

"Put us through to the Cannibal Wheel," said Roantree. "We have to warn them what to expect."

Uhura responded automatically to that voice, not realizing who had given the order - forgetting even that Kirk wasn't supposed to have given it either - until Charlie's voice crackled out of the loudspeaker.

"Wheel to Enterprise; we see 'em. They're close enough to pick up with out scopes and cameras. Are you sure that they're coming as conquerors? What are they armed with?"

"Those ships are standard war-birds, not trade vessels," Kirk replied. "They should be armed with disruptors. That's a kind of energy-weapon."

"Lord of Light! All we have is the water-cannons! Can you fight them off?"

"Water-cannon....?" Scott asked vaguely, imagining the antiquated space-station trying to shoot down Romulan war-birds with a water-pistol."

"It is a large tube that fires rocks and scrap-metal cannisters," said Quannechota, voice as level as always. "It utilizes the gas pressure of expanding water as an explosive."

"Ma God, ye're goin' ta throw rocks at the Romulans?!"

"Quannechota," Kirk snapped, "ask the computer for the probability that the Enterprise can defeat that fleet in its present condition."

"Arm tubes!" Charlie's order came over the intercom. Clearly, he didn't think there was any point in waiting for an answer. "Cannon-crew, track those ships!"

"Sir!" cried Uhura, no longer sure if she meant Scott or Kirk. "We're being scanned! The Romulans have seen us!"

"Shields up!" Scott snapped. That much he could deal with. "Evasive maneuvers, Mr. Sulu."

A flare of light poured from one of the ships on the screen.

"Sir!" cried Uhura, "we're being fired on!"

"Evade, Sulu, evade!" Kirk got the words out before Scott could. Sulu obligingly jerked the Enterprise out of the way. The disruptor-bolt shot harmlessly past the Enterprise, just missing the Cannibal Wheel and evaporating a skeletal satellite nearby.

"That's an unfriendly act!" Charlie's voice replied. "Take tight aim! Line up ammo!"

"Cut in the cloaking device!" Kirk snapped. "Quanna, add that to the computer's program."

"The cloaking device?" Scott complained, horrified that Kirk had so far forgotten his present condition as to give orders here. There cannot be two Captains on a ship! "Don't be a fool, Sir! Yon's a Romulan invention; they'll have the means for seein' through it!"

"Not in this time-line!" Kirk almost shouted, furious that Scott couldn't see what was so plain to him. "There's no Federation here! The Romulans never met or fought the Federation, never had reason to develop the cloaking device - much less the sensors that could see through it. Now turn the damned thing on!"

"Aye, Sir," Scott capitulated. "Cut in the cloaking device, Sulu."

"Cloaking device on, Sir." Sulu fiddled aimlessly with his board to hide the fact that the device was already on, and had been since Kirk had ordered it.

"Fire cannon!" Charlie bellowed from the intercom. "Reload!"

From a dark opening on the space-station's rim, a ragged boulder shot out on a jet of boiling mist. It hurtled through space to where the leading Romulan ship cruised, her course unchanged, as if she didn't notice or couldn't quite believe in the primitive missile. The rock slammed into the underside of the war-bird's wing, jarring the ship, leaving a dent, and apparently doing nothing else. The Romulan didn't return fire or attempt to evade, but sprouted the pale halo of a primitive force-field.

"Can we fire on the war-bird without revealing our position?" Roantree asked.

"No, Sir, of course not," Sulu responded before he could think. "We'd have to drop our shields. Don't you remem...." Then he realized just who had asked him that question. Laughing Buddha, he thought, it's a brother-sister act - and they're playing all of us between them, like fish on a line...even Scott...

"Braider," Quannechota announced. "Computer reports our chances of victory at less than one in eighty-seven; without damage, one in two hundred and seventy-eight."

"Ma God...." Scott whispered, flattened by the stark implications. If we fight, we might beat them, but we'll not reach the Guardian. If we run, the Romulans will take Earth!

The Cannibal Wheel fired again, this time a cluster of small stones in a thin cannister. The rocky hail-storm hit the Romulan's shield, its impact shoving the war-bird a few degrees off course, but doing no damage. The Romulan continued to sit where it was, the rest of the fleet poised also, waiting to see what else the odd wheel-shaped craft would throw at it.

"Shit, this is pathetic!" Charlie swore. "Throw another stone, Team. Throw another stone at the condor."

"Charlie!" Roantree was the first to decide. "We can't save you! We don't have the power! They're going to win, and if you keep firing, they'll kill you!"

What's this? Scott thought, suddenly realizing that he was contending with two overriding voices, not one. Three Captains here, now? My God, we'll never survive!

"Run for it, Roantree!" Charlie called as another boulder rocketed out of the Wheel. "You can save all of us, no matter what happens, if you go change time. We'll hold their attention for as long as we can, give you a clean escape, but do it, Braider! Go storm heaven! Go!"

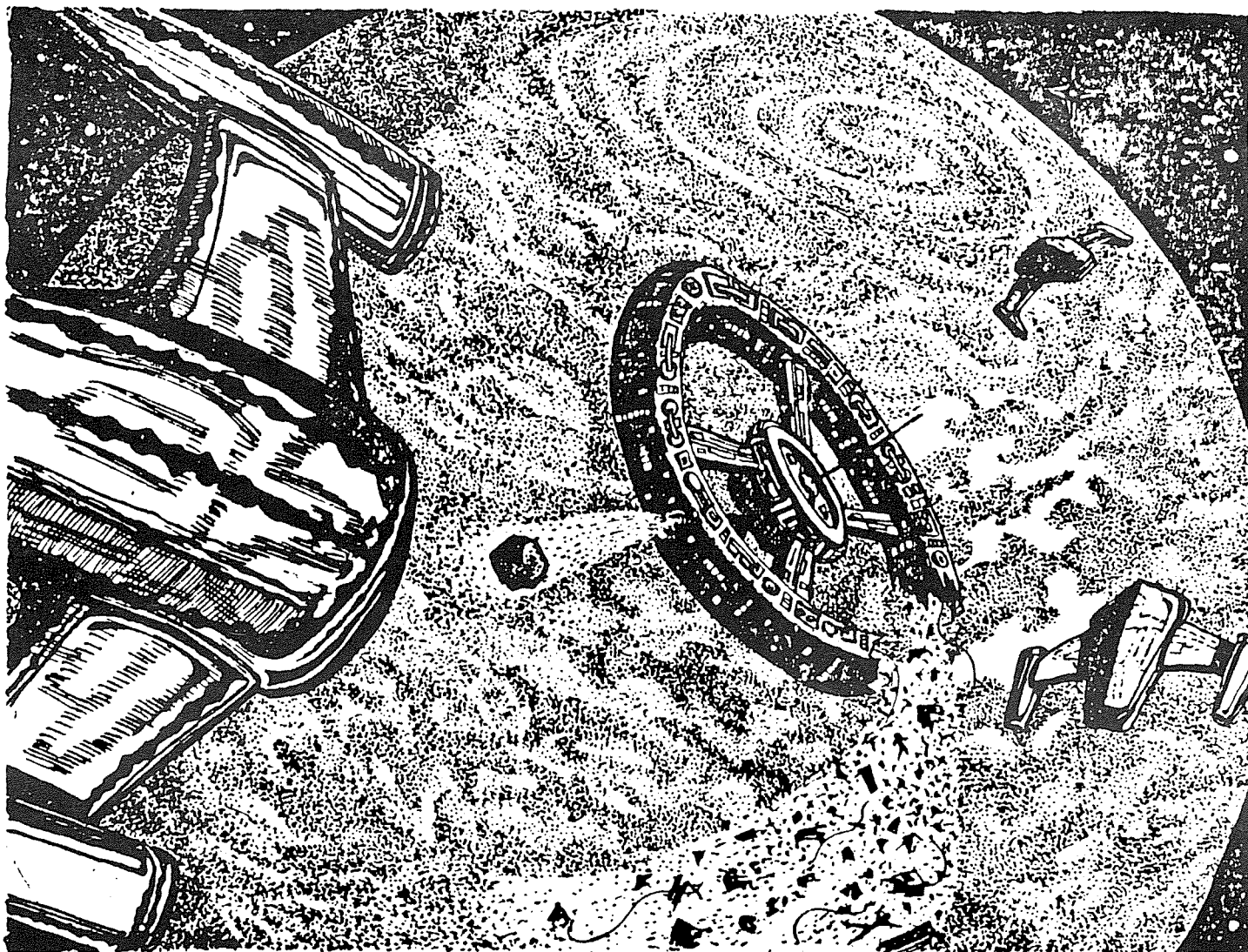
On the screen, the Romulan ship began to move. It neatly ducked away from the hurtling rock, and fired a long narrow bolt at the Cannibal Wheel. The bolt hit, and several degrees of the Wheel's rim incandescenced and disappeared. The noise on the intercom went dead, and the now-unbalanced space-station lurched in its orbit and began to fall, slowly but steadily, toward the defenseless planet below. From her gunport flew another rock, then another and another, in quick succession. Some of the rocks struck the pursuing war-bird and jarred it enough to ruin the aim of its second disruptor bolt. The Enterprise crew stood dead silent as they watched the Anarchist craft go down fighting, and the war-bird dropping after it like a striking hawk.

"Time to go," said Roantree quietly.

"Mr. Scott, we'd better get out of here," Kirk agreed. "The other ships may come looking for us."

"Aye," Scott replied woodenly. No dissension. 'Tis unanimous. "Mr. Sulu, put us on course for the Guardian, warp four."

"Yes, Sir." Sulu complied, and Earth dwindled rapidly on the viewscreen, taking its horror and tragedy with it. Within seconds the image was gone, and nothing remained but the unbroken pattern of indifferent stars.



"Braider," Quannechota was the first to break the hush. "Can you think of a suitable song for the occasion?"

Shocked heads turned. Only Kirk and Roantree understood why Quannechota had asked. Without a word, Roantree got up and went to Uhura's station. Uhura scrambled almost fearfully out of the way as the Anarchist captain rummaged in her belt-pouch and came up with a tape, plugged it into the console, and set it to play. The hammering, somber melody and words filtered out onto the bridge, and through the rest of the ship as well.

Somehow people must be free. I hope the day comes soon.
Won't you please come to Chicago? Show your face.
From the bottom of the ocean to the mountains of the moon,
Won't you please come to Chicago? No one else can take your place.
We can change the world - rearrange the world.
It's dying - if you believe in justice.
It's dying - if you believe in freedom.
It's dying - let a man live his own life.
It's dying - rules and regulations, who needs 'em?
Throw 'em out the door!

Only Kirk and Quannechota dared to look openly as Jenneth Roantree resumed her place at the console, and turned her set face toward the opening field of stars.

Tiptoe Through The Tulips, They Just Might Take A Hunk Hunk Out of Your Leg

Captain's Log, Stardate 6129.8.

ELEVEN DAYS OUT, AND MORALE IS UNSTEADY. THE CREW IS STILL SHOCKED AND SUBDUED OVER THE DEATH OF THE CANNIBAL WHEEL, AND THE ROMULAN TAKE-OVER OF EARTH. JENNETH ANNOUNCED FIVE DAYS OF RITUAL MOURNING, WHICH HELPED A LOT - A SURPRISINGLY LARGE NUMBER OF OUR CREW JOINED IN - BUT PEOPLE ARE STILL UPSET.

I SUGGESTED TO SCOTTY THAT HE KEEP THE CREW BUSY STUDYING THIS STRANGE NEW UNIVERSE AS WE SNEAK THROUGH IT, WHICH HE SUBSEQUENTLY DID. UNFORTUNATELY, THE RESULTING PICTURE IS VERY GRIM. IT APPEARS THAT IN THE ABSENCE OF THE FEDERATION, THIS HAS BECOME A ROMULAN GALAXY. AS WE MOVE OUT TOWARD THE RIM, WE FIND THE COMMUNICATION BANDS LOADED WITH MESSAGES IN ROMULAN. THE REGULAR SPACE-LANES ARE THICK WITH ROMULAN SHIPS. WE DARE NOT COME TOO NEAR ANY PLANETARY SYSTEM, BUT LONG-RANGE SCANS SHOW LARGE MILITARY AND INDUSTRIAL BASES ON WORLD AFTER WORLD. WE'VE SEEN NO SIGN OF ANY OTHER INTELLIGENT SPECIES IN SPACE, UNTIL TODAY.

TODAY WE SAW TWO ROMULAN WAR-BIRDS FLYING IN COMPANY WITH A THOLIAN RHOMBOID SHIP. THEY MOVED STEADILY, AT NORMAL CRUISING SPEED, HEADING APPROXIMATELY TOWARD ORGANIA. WHAT THEIR BUSINESS WAS, OR WHAT THEY WERE DOING TOGETHER, NONE OF US CAN GUESS - BUT THE VERY IDEA OF THE HOSTILE, SUSPICIOUS, ISOLATIONIST, UTTERLY-ALIEN THOLIANS CRUISING THIS DEEP INTO THE GALAXY, AND IN COMPANY WITH TWO ROMULAN SHIPS, MAKES ME VERY UNEASY. HOW MUCH OF THIS UNIVERSE CAN WE EVEN COMPREHEND?

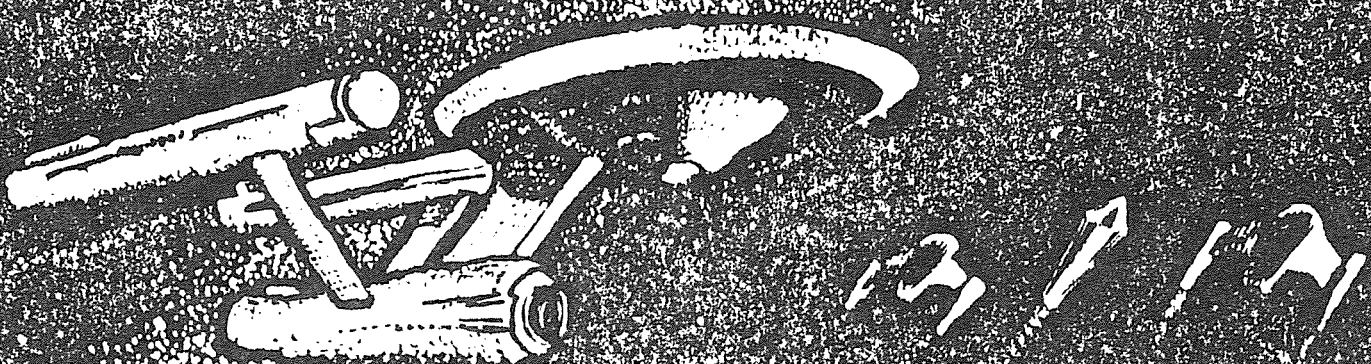
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Kirk shut off the recorder, glanced at the chronometer, and wondered why Quannechota hadn't come to his cabin yet. She usually showed up right after dinner. He buzzed the intercom for the cabin that Sparks and Roantree shared, surprised by a twinge of jealousy at the thought that Quanna might be there, and then relieved to find that nobody answered. What's the matter with me? he chided himself. She's married to them, after all.... He didn't want to dwell on that thought. He opened the intercom again and called the bridge.

Sparks answered. "Sure, Big Jim," he bellowed amiably. "Quanna's here. She's been working on a theory about the spread of the Romulan Empire, and pumping the computer like crazy. You want to talk to her?"

"No, I'll come up there. Kirk out." Damn right, I will! What's Sparks doing on the communications console? Where's Uhura? ...No, she's off this shift...but then why isn't Jalina there?

A few moments later, as he stepped out of the turbolift and looked around the bridge, Kirk saw the answer to one question and a whole array of new mysteries. Ensign Jalina was huddled by the Environmental Engineering station, looking as if she wanted to be part of the furniture. Ann Bailey sat at the Engineering station, alternately studying diagrams of the ship's structural elements and looking over her shoulder at the huddle around the Science/Library Computer station. Sparks was at the communications board, running constant checks through every hailing frequency he could find. Jenneth Roantree and Jean Battre-Le-Diable hovered at Quannechota's elbows as she tapped the library computer's keys like a keyboard musician playing a Bach fugue on a church organ. Lt. DeSalle sat at the con, looking helpless, ignored, and miserable.



Kirk walked up behind the crowd at Quannechota's station, announced his presence with a polite cough, and asked, "Would somebody who's not too busy please tell me what the hell is going on?"

Roantree looked up at him and grinned that damnably familiar grin. "Quanna's been working on a theory, comparing the spread of the Romulans in your time-line with the known military capabilities of the planets beyond the Neutral Zone. She added a few other factors - analyses of all known Romulan social-psychologies, economic priorities, a lot of things I can't follow - and she's come up with a likely-looking map of this time-line's Romulan Empire. Sparks has been checking it against the amount of radio-jabber per parsec, and so far the map looks pretty accurate."

"89.5% overlap," Quanna concurred, sounding faintly smug.

"So now we know where they are, and particularly where they aren't," Jean Battre-Le-Diable enthused, "and we can plot a safe course around 'em."

"Yes, very nice," said Kirk, intrigued, stepping forward to look at the small display screen. "Show me the map."

Quanna obligingly punched buttons. The screen bloomed to a view of a thick pie-wedge of patterned stars, most systems picked out in red and connected by a web of thin red lines. "These are most probably Romulan-ruled systems," she said. "The lines are expected travel routes. The white stars are those probably left untouched, and this -" She punched another chord of keys, and a dotted white line appeared on the screen. " - is therefore the safest course to the planet of the Guardian of Forever. Shall I record it on the navigation memory?"

"Might as well," said Kirk. He had to admit that Quanna's map was an impressive piece of work. He glanced again at DeSalle and Jalina, understanding why they were acting so subdued. One simply could not order the

Anarchists to do anything, much less get off the bridge, and it would be hard to argue or cajole or otherwise persuade them to please-go-away when they were hot on the trail of a subject as exciting and relevant as this. Kirk decided to take pity on his cowed junior officers and entice these disturbing people away.

"Very good, Quanna," he began. "That's a...an elegant piece of deduction, I must say."

"But you haven't seen the completed proof," Quannechota demurred. "Sparks has not finished checking yet. And of course we must check constantly as we proceed, in case there is an anomaly in the pattern."

"Sure, but there's plenty of time for that, and 89% accuracy so far looks pretty conclusive to me. Why don't we go down to the rec-room and celebrate?"

Quannechota looked him up and down, concluded that the kind of celebration he probably wanted was not the sort of thing usually performed in such a public area as a recreation room, smiled, and relinquished her seat. Sparks and Roantree caught her look, and grinned at each other.

"No, you two go ahead," said Roantree. "We want to stay up here and keep checking out the radio-noise."

"Sure you wouldn't like to unwind over a few drinks?" Kirk tried again. "Besides selector-made beer, I think we can scare up some Saurian Brandy. I think there's some Argelian wine down in storage...."

"Hey, that sounds interesting!" Jean Battre-Le-Diable stood up, missing the reproving looks from Sparks and Roantree. "Argelian wine - there's one booze I haven't tried."

"Oh yes you have," Sparks cut in. "That was the purplish stuff the anthropologist tried out on us two days ago. You were there."

"Me? No. On my household honor, I've never tried the stuff."

"Never?" Quannechota favored him with a raised eyebrow. "'White man speak with forked tongue.'"

In reply, Jean smirked and stuck out his tongue at her. It was forked.

No, I didn't really see that, Kirk thought, rubbing his eye.

"Hey, something's interfering with reception!" Sparks snapped, suddenly all business.

"Sensors on," replied Quanna, sliding neatly back into her chair and scampering her fingers across buttons.

"What the hell?" wailed DeSalle from his perch at the command chair. He was clearly out of his depth.

"As soon as you get something, put it on the main screen," said Roantree, slipping into the Assistant Navigator's station. Jean Battre-Le-Diable hopped into the one remaining empty seat on the gallery, which happened to be Defense and Weapons.

"Radio noise, interference increasing...." Sparks chanted methodically. "Direction, roughly 25 degrees, at 2 o'clock high."

That's one hell of a measuring system, Kirk thought, moving automatically toward the con until he literally bumped into DeSalle.

"Sir," DeSalle whispered, clutching the arms of the chair as if for dear life. "Mr. Scott told me to stay here!"

"Oh. Right." Blushing more than a little, Kirk hurried to the Helm console and sat down. That was one station he knew he could handle.

"Tracking...tracking...." Quannechota murmured. "There!"

The main screen changed views. Everyone saw it at once. Sparks, Bailey and Roantree gasped. Jean Battre-Le-Diable muttered something in French that startled DeSalle. Ensign Jalina gave a short scream. Kirk pressed a hand to his forehead and groaned. Oh no, not that again.... was all he could think. We killed it once... but that wasn't in this universe.

In the center of the screen, writhing slowly, blotting out the stars, lay an amorphous blob of absolute darkness. The Enterprise crew knew very well what it was; it had almost killed them once. "The thing that destroyed the Intrepid," Kirk murmured aloud. "But that was in another time-line...and besides, Spock is dead."

"This is one hell of a time to misquote poetry," Roantree growled. "What is that thing? How dangerous is it? Can we get away from it? How can it be killed?"

"Inside that dark area is a giant space-going amoeba," Kirk explained. "It repolarizes energy, and eats it. Any kind of energy will do - from engines, from suns, from living things."

"Fascinating," murmured Quannechota and Jean Battre-Le-Diable together.

"The way to kill it is to throw a bottle of antimatter into its nucleus. The problem is finding the nucleus without getting inside the dark zone, which is its feeding area. At this range, we can probably get away from it."

"Let's run, then," said Roantree. "We're not here for sight-seeing or dragon-slaying games."

"Right," said Kirk, reaching for his board.

"Helm, evasive maneuvers!" DeSalle practically yelled, straining to get the order officially voiced before the action was finished.

"Done," said Kirk, punching out the course change. The blob of darkness began to slide off the screen.

"New objects approaching," Quannechota announced. "Coming in at 85 degrees, 8 o'clock low. Approaching fast. They are...ships. Romulan war-birds."

"Better cloak," said Kirk, snapping on the cloaking device.

"Change course, too," Roantree suggested. "Keep us out of their way."

"Right." Kirk complied.

"Wait a minute!" DeSalle objected. "I'm supposed to be - I'm supposed to say that!"

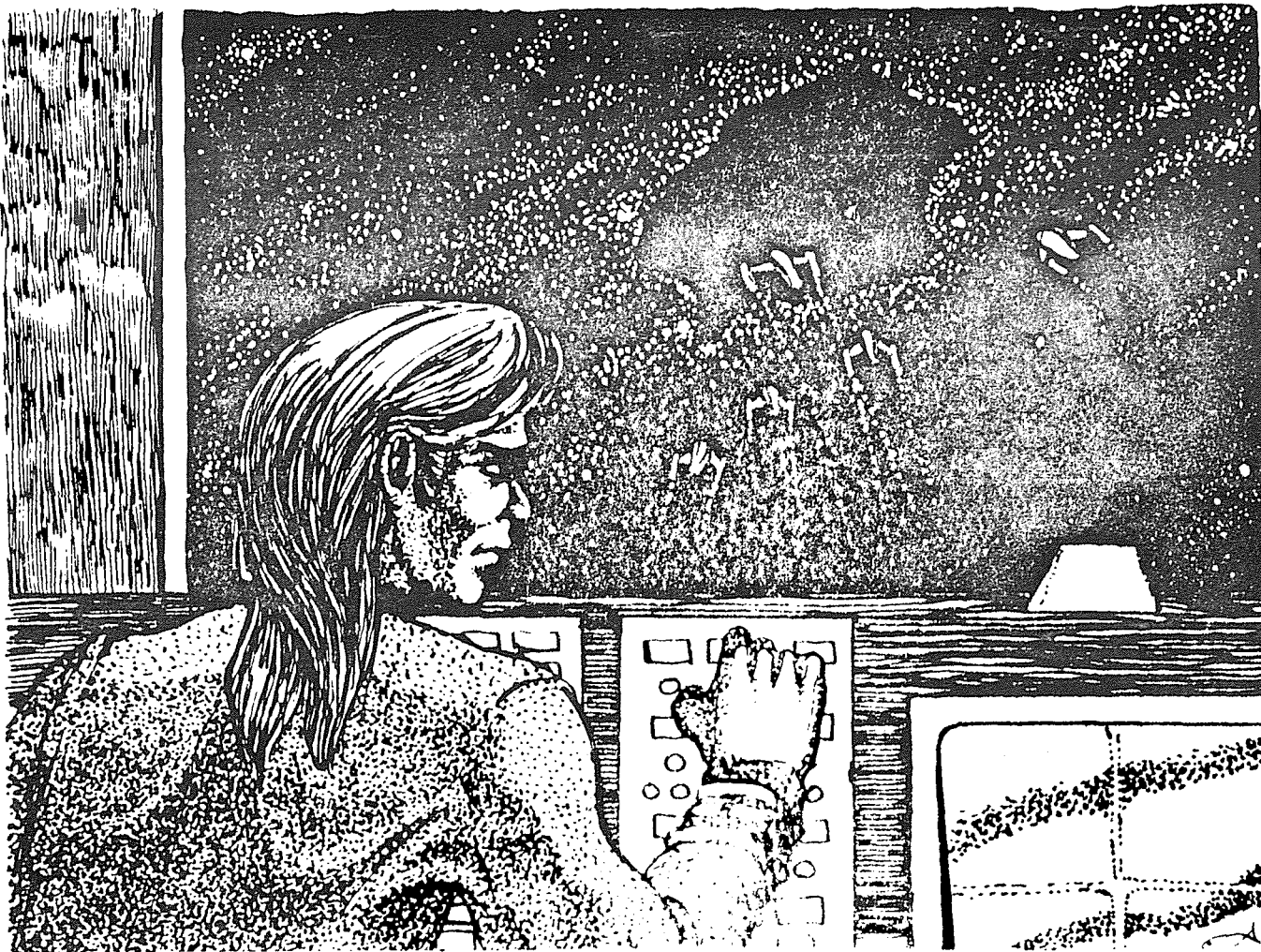
"So she said it first. Big deal!" Sparks replied. "This is no time to play tag."

"The war-birds are heading directly toward the zone of darkness," Quannechota reported. "They seem aware of the creature. Possibly they plan to attack."

"Let's sit tight and see how they do it," said Roantree.

"Good idea," Kirk agreed. "Cut speed...coasting...."

DeSalle hunched down in the chair and wished he were somewhere else - maybe Baffin-land. He was supposed to be in command. Mr. Scott had officially put him in command, he had his butt firmly planted on the command chair; but command itself was bouncing around the bridge like the ball in a soccer game, and not once had the ball bounced toward him. He'd heard about the discipline problems the Anarchists were causing, but this was the first time he'd ever seen an example of it. He found the experience bewildering, dizzying, annoying, and



quietly horrifying. He couldn't even be sure of the instant when command had slipped away from him, precisely when the Anarchists - or was it Kirk? - had taken over.

"Here they come...here they are...there they go...." Quannechota announced in an expressionless chant as the Romulan war-birds - five of them - whipped past less than 100 kilometers away, and reappeared on the forward screen. They were heading straight toward the blob of star-eating darkness. The bridge crew watched silently as a single war-bird veered off, cut speed and coasted, letting the other four ships hurtle onward, straight into the heart of that writhing dark spot. "Increasing magnification," Quanna noted as the image on the screen grew in size. "Agitation noted."

The bridge contingent watched in horrified fascination as the dark spot swelled, writhed in some strange affliction, pulsed, and suddenly erupted in a burst of light. The screen darkened down rapidly, adjusting to the change in intensity, then lightened to normal again.

The star-field was clear. There was no blob of darkness, no sign of the four ships, nothing but drifts of incandescent dust and the lone war-bird observing from a safe distance. Kirk shivered, understanding it.

"Composition of the dust," Quannechota reported, "indicates the former presence of 200,000 tons of biological tissue, and some 120,000 tons of assorted structural metals. Judging from the mass of the remaining war-bird, I would estimate that this dust is all that remains of the amoeba-like creature and the four Romulan ships."

"Kamikazes!" Roantree whispered. "They killed it by a suicide dive!"

"Bloodthirsty Romulan bastards!" Kirk swore, mainly to himself. "Four ships with all hands, when one anti-matter bomb would have done it! No respect for life, not even their own."

"Perhaps they were unaware of any other means of destroying the creature," Quannechota suggested. "And there is no evidence to prove that those ships carried full crews, or indeed, any crews at all. They may have been under automatic control, perhaps by the remaining ship."

"I doubt it. Romulans aren't that good at cybernetics; they'd rather use people, since it's cheaper. I don't think they'd try very hard to find other means...." Kirk watched the remaining war-bird turn and cruise off, probably heading home to report the creature's destruction. Four ships, he thought. Even with skeleton crews, how many? Fifty? A hundred? More? Thrown away! Wasteful, ruthless bastards....

Then he noticed how quiet it was now, turned to look at the rest of the bridge personnel, and was caught by the pained look on DeSalle's face. It reminded him of where he was and what he'd just done. Usurping command, destroying discipline. Now I'm doing it too! Got to stop. Get them out of here.... "Well, that seems to be that," he announced, faking a respectable cheerfulness. "Now let's all go down to the rec-room and have a drink." He stood up, relinquishing the helm, hoping desperately that the Anarchists would follow him.

They did. "Amen to that!" Jean Battre-Le-Diable agreed, hopping out of his seat. "I could use a few belts. Anyone else?" He grinned, glad for the companionship, as Sparks, Bailey, Quannechota and Roantree got up and filed after him toward the turbolift.

"You go ahead," Kirk added. "I'll be right down. I just want to talk to DeSalle for a minute."

"Sure, but don't take too long," Roantree replied. "If you don't get there before the pitcher's empty, you know who'll get the next one." The turbolift doors whooshed shut.

"Wh-what did that mean?" whispered Ensign Jalina, sliding out of her haven like a hen tip-toeing out of the coop after a hawk's shadow had passed.

"They drink beer by the pitcher-full," Kirk explained. "After it's empty, the first person to stand up has to get the next one. If I come in late, that'll be me."

"Oh." She gave Kirk a wide-eyed stare, trying to imagine the Captain being sent on a beer-run.

Kirk ignored her look and turned to DeSalle. "Lieutenant, I'm sorry about that," he explained quietly. "I was trying to lure them away when the trouble started, but after the thing appeared there just wasn't time for anything else. You know we can't pull rank in front of them."

"I know, Sir." DeSalle's face was a study in misery. "It was an emergency situation...But Sir, you know you're not supposed to...to do that. I'm afraid I'm going to have to report this to Commander Scott."

"I know. If I can get away from the Anarchists long enough, I'll tell him myself. Carry on, Lieutenant." Kirk marched stoically into the turbolift, being careful not to limp.

Behind him, DeSalle leaned his head in his hands and wondered just what he was going to tell Scott, and how in hell he was going to explain it. The only good news in the whole incident was that they hadn't been eaten by the amoeba-thing, or noticed by the Romulans. But isn't that the main idea, after all? a treacherous thought whispered. Who cares how the discipline works, so long as the job is done and done well? He quashed the unmilitary thought in something close to horror.

"Sir?" Ensign Jalina almost whispered. "We're standing still. Shouldn't we be on our way?"

"What? Oh. Yes...." DeSalle stepped over to the helm and punched the buttons for 'resume course,' then went back to the command chair to brood. In his preoccupation he had neglected to notice that the course which the ship resumed was the route outlined on Quannechota's map.

* * * * *



Project Tape R-128, Roantree recording.

WE'VE JUST SEEN FIVE ROMULAN SHIPS - FOUR ATTACKERS AND A WITNESS - DESTROY A GIANT SPACE-MONSTER. THE SHEER SIZE, THE AMOUNT OF POWER, OF THE ELEMENTS WE'RE DEALING WITH OUT HERE LEAVES ME A LITTLE DAZED. BAILEY SAYS TO BE SURE TO MENTION THAT IN DEALING WITH FORCES THIS AWESOME WE HAVE TO BE ABSOLUTELY SURE OF EVERYTHING WE'RE DOING: THERE'S NO ROOM FOR ERROR OUT HERE. I KNOW. I KNOW. QUIT PHILOSOPHIZING; LET'S BURY OUR WORRY IN BEER. TOO MUCH SPECULATING CAN DRIVE YOU NUTS IN THIS BUSINESS.

* * * * *

When Kirk walked into the rec-room, the first thing he noticed was that the pitcher on the Anarchists' table was still two-thirds full. He was safe. He smiled and walked toward them, and then noticed the second thing. Roantree had one arm around Quannechota's shoulders and had pulled her close, and was gently nuzzling her cheek. The worst of it was that Quanna was smiling. Kirk felt the wild surge of jealousy like a bomb going off in his belly. He stopped short, momentarily lost track of his bad leg and almost fell, but recovered fast.

Roantree glanced up at him, her look first concerned and then surprised. She can tell what I'm feeling! Kirk remembered. Stop. Got to stop it. Shut...down.... He managed, and quickly, but his smile was strained as he walked up to the table and reached for a chair. Roantree obligingly held it out for him. She thinks it was just my leg bothering me, he guessed. Let her. Bitch. He sat down, still smiling, and took the remaining beer mug.

"Space monsters - brrr!" Sparks was saying. "I remember seeing something about that one in the memory-tapes. Are there any more like that, do you think?"

"I've never seen nor heard of any." Kirk was grateful for the change of subject. "Of course, that doesn't prove anything, not in this time-line. All the same, I think our biggest problem is going to be the Romulans."

"Quanna's map should keep us clear of them," said Roantree, affectionately running a hand through Quannechota's black hair.

"Provided that Scotty...and the rest of the senior - uh, staff will accept it," said Kirk, still smiling. Take your hands off her, damn you!

"Tell us when their next meeting is, and we'll try to persuade them," Roantree answered, outwardly calm and inwardly bewildered. What's wrong with him? I can feel rage pouring off him in waves. Rage...at me! Why me? She slid her hand down to Quanna's shoulder, an old and automatic gesture seeking assurance.

"I don't know. I'll ask Scotty. I have to go see him soon anyway." I have to tell him I usurped command. He'll start by throwing me off the bridge. Better if he could throw you off the ship! Stop touching her that way, you...you.... He couldn't think of an epithet that fit, except for a few obscure oaths from obscure worlds in his own universe - nothing that would mean anything to Jenneth Roantree. He rummaged through his space-sailor's memory of assorted obscenities, trying to think of something effective.

"We can always wait until tomorrow, and catch him when he comes up for his shift," Roantree suggested. He's angry at me...because...I have something he wants. What? Two good eyes? A body that works right? Probably. Poor Jim!

"I'll see if I can catch him before then." You... 'queer?' No. Not unnatural to her. Besides, implies 'weakling.' She's not that. 'Bull-dyke?' Too obscure. 'Man-hater?' No way - not with a husband like Sparks, or the way she treated me.... Don't think about that. Damn! Damn! Damn! I can't even insult her!

"It's a little late for hunting up Scotty now," Roantree decided. "And you look pretty tired, Jim. Why don't you and Quanna go off and get some extra rest? Don't worry about the beer; we'll finish it up." Quanna can take his mind off his troubles.... Get his middle-foot working and he'll forget about his bad leg.

"Right," Kirk promptly agreed, seizing the opportunity and one of Quannechota's hands. "Come on, Quanna, let's go to bed." Get away from that woman, and pay attention to me!

"Of course," said Quannechota, smiling slightly as she stood up and followed him. So eager! Yes, the Solstice-Rite ended much of his prissiness. "Good night, Citizens."

"Good night," the other Anarchists chorused, grinning knowingly.

Kirk practically ran out the door, half-dragging Quanna after him.

"Ah, l'amour," sighed Jean Battre-Le-Daible. "Ain't it beautiful?"

Bailey snickered.

"Oh yes," sighed Sparks and Roantree, giving each other tender hot glances.

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Project Tape R-129, Roantree recording.

IT'S LATE AND I'M ABOUT TO GO TO BED. ALL SHIP SYSTEMS GO. MORALE IMPROVING. MINOR SETBACK WITH KIRK, BUT QUANNA SEEMS TO BE HANDLING IT. SHE'S HANDLING A LOT OF THINGS WELL, AS USUAL. I JUST CHECKED OUT OUR CURRENT COURSE, AND THE SHIP IS ALREADY FOLLOWING QUANNA'S ROUTE. I GUESS THOSE TWO WE LEFT ON THE BRIDGE DECIDED IT, OR MAYBE THEY HELD A QUICK SENIOR-STAFF MEETING THROUGH THE INTERCOM AND AGREED ON IT. THERE'S NO RUSH ON HUNTING UP SCOTTY. SO, EARLY BEDTIME FOR ME, FOR ONCE. PATIENCE, SPARKS - I'M COMING...HEH!

* * * * *

Kirk fell back on the pillow, still panting, sweat-slicked and exhausted. Quannechota gave a drowsy purr, actually smiled broadly at him, and settled one limp arm across his chest. He caught her hand and kissed it, and watched while her dark eyes drifted closed. She dropped into sleep easily, her breathing going soft and slow and regular long before his did. There, he exulted, stroking her arm, you liked that, didn't you? Wasn't that good? Better than Jenneth? ...Damn.

He looked away from her, resting his eyes on the cool abstract pattern of the room-divider screen, and gave a long weary sigh. Hell, she doesn't even know how to feel jealousy. How can I tell her? Whom could I tell? Who'd believe? Jealous of my...my own sister.... Oh God!

He turned his gaze back to Quannechota, studying her closed and sleeping face, and his fingers tightened on her arm. He wanted to grab her by the shoulders and shake her until she told him if she loved him or not. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and beg her to love him. He didn't dare wake her up for fear he'd start babbling like a fool. He knew, with no surprise, that he was madly in love with her - and he had no idea how she felt about him.

Do you like me, just a little? he asked silently, brushing his fingers across the long plane of her cheek. I know you're happy to be pregnant, grateful perhaps.... I think you respect my skill at my job... You said you were impressed by the universe I represent. You seem to enjoy going to bed with me.... Or do you?

He reared up on one elbow and peered at her, trying to catch some clue from her unguarded sleep. How would I know? he wondered, shaken with sudden doubt. She could be faking. Hard to tell, with a woman.... I've tried to be good, sometimes, but too often I've been rough and fast and maybe even cruel.... What if I've hurt her? Even once, hurt that way...would the good times cancel it out? I don't know. How could I know? But I have to, to win her....

He carefully edged away from her and back down on the pillow. The very idea of asking Quannechota such a question, of breaching her silent and immense privacy, was as offensive as trying to force hysterics from a Vulcan. Still, the question clawed at him, and he knew he couldn't sleep before he found some kind of an answer. What is it like for a woman? How is it in that kind of body...? The words triggered a memory. There was a way, he remembered, a way to know at least part of the answer. He shuddered to think about it. His reaction angered him, and firmed his resolve.

Janice Lester. Remember.... Kirk gritted his teeth and forced himself to remember, clearly and without defenses, those endless hours he'd spent trapped in that madwoman's body, the terror and desperation and exactly how that alien flesh had felt. Awful! Horrible beyond belief! The memory grabbed him, worse than ever before, as if he'd fallen through an open trap-door into the heart of horrors. Short, scrawny, almost emaciated...arms so weak...fragile bird-bones, muscles like strings - and even that little was flabby! And over that ...soft...nameless, alien softness...like a sheath of foam-rubber...bunching senselessly into thick cushions on my hips, and those...mounds...tugged painfully on my chest no matter how I moved...and that strange vulnerable hollow I didn't want to think about - I didn't dare touch myself, not anywhere - I was that close to panic!

He pressed his forearm against his mouth and bit until it hurt, trying to drive the horrors back with clean pain, but still the thoughts came through, images he'd really never dared think about before. And the worse was the looks from the guards - men, all of them - the glances with faint but unmistakable flickers of lust in them.... No, no! Too much! To think that they...wanted...that! Nooo - For an instant his mind whited out in a silent scream. His teeth ground into his arm until they drew blood. His whole body went rigid, shaking and sick with denial and horror.

Jim? What's wrong? Are you under attack? The thought was sharp and clear, the questioning mind unmistakable.

Jenneth. Recognition broke the terror, pulling him back to here-and-now. Kirk relaxed and pulled his arm away from his face. I'm all right, he thought back. Just an old nightmare. You stopped it. He could picture her face very clearly, draped in her loosened hair. I'm safe now.

Good. Sleep well.... The clear-cut thought faded into a wordless feeling of reassurance, which in turn dissolved as her attention moved away.

Kirk lay quiet in the dark for long moments afterward, thinking about that. Clear words this time, he marvelled. The link's growing stronger.... The amazing thing was that it didn't frighten him. He'd just

seen clear proof that Roantree couldn't - or perhaps wouldn't - directly reach his mind unless his emotional barriers were all the way down. Now he knew where he stood with her. All I have to do is avoid thinking about Federation government or Starfleet when I'm...upset. Simple. He smiled. All those years with Spock taught me some things.... If only he could know that....

His arm itched where he'd bitten it. Slowly, carefully, taking great pains not to waken Quannechota, he slipped out of bed, padded into the bathroom, flicked on a light and examined the marks. They weren't bad - mostly bruises now - and the skin was broken in only one small spot. He washed it off, flicked out the light, and tiptoed quietly back to bed.

Quannechota stirred slightly as he settled in beside her, and slipped one sleepy arm across his chest. He lay still, waiting until she was soundly asleep again, noticing for the first time now the muscles in her long lean arm stood up like iron bars. Intrigued, he slid one hand along her upper arm and closed his grip around the long crest of her bicep. Her upper arm was as thick as a young tree, and he couldn't get his fingers all the way around it. Even in sleep the muscles were firm and springy, and the bones were as big and hard as Number Two crowbars. Hard-country woman, he thought, impressed. I've seen her eat like a farm-hand... probably worked like one, too. Lean hips...small, firm breasts...nothing soft about her.... She's nothing like Janice. None of them are.... What if....?

He rolled against Quannechota, hands wandering idly over the sharp wings of her shoulder-blades, considering a strange and fascinating idea. What if Janice Lester was sick in more ways than one? Not just in mind, but...scrawny, sickly, small...a physical weakling. Easy prey for any bully...a natural victim. Is that why she went mad?! Then I didn't do it! It wasn't me, it was other men - bullying bastards who like their women weak - not me! Not me! Not guilty!

Kirk laughed softly and wrapped his arms tight around Quanna, exulting in the firm, springy feel of her sleeping body. No weakling this; she was as strong and supple as a young pine tree, and he knew how that sweet-wood flesh could take fire and burn. He breathed the wood-smoke smell of her smooth black hair and imagined her lying on a fur rug beside a fire of resinous branches, naked in the flickering soft light, smiling, waiting...Oh Miramanee! Oh love, I won't lose you again! he sang in his fantasy. Strong...you won't die, won't be scared away, won't leave me like all the rest.... He tracked kisses across the crown of her head, growing intoxicated by the rough-silk texture of her hair. Oh I love you love you please say you love me best please don't ever leave me please please I love you....

It took him several minutes to realize that the sweet fierce tingling in his veins wasn't coming from himself. It wasn't just that it was growing so slowly - that could have been leftover fatigue from the previous lovemaking. The giveaway was the unexplained seething delight that surged in his chest. Wondering why in the galaxy he should be so sensitive there, Kirk paused to concentrate on the odd sensations. They didn't fade, but grew stronger. He felt, very clearly, the impression of a wide hand closing on one side of his chest, squeezing, and the flesh joyfully burning and yielding.... And then he knew.

Jenneth! With Sparks! They - I was in the same mood, frequency open.... Get away! Think of something else, quick! Quick - The quick brown fox jumped over the lazy dog.... Specific dimensions of Starship-class craft, exterior: primary hull diameter.... There. It's fading. I can control it.... I can.... What if I can steer this?

He rolled carefully away from Quanna, thinking that over. Jenneth didn't realize I was there. If her memories can steal into my mind, maybe I can look into hers.... For an instant - but only an instant - he was shocked at the very idea of playing telepathic spy. Telepathic voyeur, he corrected, remembering what Jenneth and Sparks were busy doing. Then he remembered what he'd originally wanted to know when he'd dipped into those disastrous memories, and realized that this was the perfect chance to find out. Just scientific curiosity, he decided. Jenneth need never know.... Deliberately he relaxed and concentrated on Roantree - her surroundings, the image of her face, and what she was doing.

It was like tuning in on a subspace signal - faint at first, vague with interference, then definite, loud and clear. She was, indeed, too busy to notice him. She was lying close against Sparks, her face buried in his shaggy beard, nuzzling toward his ear. One arm was wrapped around his neck, her hand spider-walking across

his back, and the other hand unconsciously gripping a fold of blanket. Her whole body seemed wrapped in soft waves of liquid fire, and the intensity was steadily growing. Kirk lay still and observed, fascinated. He could feel Sparks' slow, elaborate kisses working down her throat to her warm-shivering breast, one hand sliding across her taut belly, over her thigh and back, fingers whispering through thick curls toward that mysterious hollow place, probing the hidden furrow.... And at that touch the surging delight in his/her nerves took a quantum jump, flared like a sudden nova, rose to a peak of desire as fierce as he'd ever know it, and yet there was a promise of still more, and of further peaks beyond that. Impossible! Kirk reeled away from that incredible capacity. I can't.... It'll kill me.... Let me out! Let me....

Quannechota broke into wakefulness, sure that something was wrong, but not certain what. She blinked sleep out of her eyes, lay still and listened, noting the unchanged semidark of the cabin, the small noises of the ship, the sound of Kirk's breathing - Yes, the difference was there; he was breathing in long gasps, as if he'd been running. She lifted her head and looked at him.

Kirk was lying on his back, staring straight up at the ceiling, his face a set mask and his hands clenched on the blankets. For a moment she wondered if he were having another nightmare, if he was really awake, if he noticed her at all. Then she heard him say, quietly but very clearly, "It's unfair. They get more out of it than we do.... It's not fair."

"What is wrong?" she asked. "What is not fair?"

Kirk turned to look at her, but didn't answer. He reared up on one elbow, carefully touched her chin and lifted her face, and studied her for long silent minutes. Puzzled, she waited for him to speak. When he did, his words surprised her.

"Quannechota," he said, "I love you. I want you to stay with me, you and the child, too. Will you marry me?"

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Project Tape R-131, Roantree recording.

HEADACHE AFTER HEADACHE. WE HADN'T BEEN ON THE BRIDGE FOR AN HOUR THIS MORNING BEFORE SCOTTY FOUND OUT THAT WE WERE FOLLOWING QUANNA'S MAP - APPARENTLY NOBODY TOLD HIM LAST NIGHT - AND HE PRACTICALLY BOUNCED OFF THE CEILING. I CAN UNDERSTAND HIM BEING BENT OUT OF SHAPE BY THE FACT THAT NOBODY TOLD HIM ABOUT IT, BUT STILL, WHEE, WHAT A TEMPER-TANTRUM! HE WAS SO PISSED, HE WANTED TO SET THE SHIP BACK ON THE OLD UNSAFE COURSE, IF YOU PLEASE. WE TRIED TO EXPLAIN WHY THAT WAS A BAD IDEA, AND HE ACTUALLY TURNED PURPLE. WE COULD SEE HIM BITING BACK A MESS OF NASTY WORDS. THEN HE GOT UP AND STAMPED INTO THE ELEVATOR, AND WE COULD HEAR HIM KICKING THE WALLS FOR TEN MINUTES.

WELL, THAT DID COOL HIM OFF. HE CAME BACK A FEW MINUTES LATER, NICE AND CALM, POLITELY ASKED ME INTO THE ELEVATOR, AND TOLD ME - VERY CAREFULLY - THAT QUANNA'S COURSE WAS A GOOD ONE AND WE'D STICK TO IT, BUT WE REALLY SHOULDN'T GO UP ON THE BRIDGE WHEN HE WASN'T THERE, BECAUSE WE WERE STILL TRAINEES AND MIGHT MAKE DISASTROUS MISTAKES WHEN NO EXPERT WAS THERE TO WATCH US. MAKES SENSE. I AGREED, AND THAT SEEMED TO CALM HIM DOWN QUITE A BIT. I DON'T THINK IT APPLIES TO QUANNA, THOUGH; IT'S PRETTY WELL AGREED - I'VE HEARD THE OTHER CREWFOLK SAY IT - THAT THERE'S NOBODY ON THE SHIP NOW WHO UNDERSTANDS THE COMPUTER AS WELL AS SHE DOES. SO, I GUESS SHE CAN GO UP ON THE BRIDGE WHEN I CAN'T. PITY. I'M SEEING LESS OF HER EVERY DAY. WELL, NO HOPE FOR IT BUT TO LEARN MY JOB AS QUICKLY AS I CAN.

ANOTHER PROBLEM: KIRK WANTS TO MARRY QUANNA. SHE DOESN'T KNOW WHAT TO MAKE OF THIS, AND I DON'T EITHER, NOR DOES SPARKS. WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO TALK TO KIRK ABOUT THIS, JUST AS SOON AS THE SHIFT IS OVER.

* * * * *

Kirk reported for his turn in Engineering at mid-watch, as usual. The answer that came back was from Scott, and it wasn't usual. "Captain," his voice was clipped and firm. "Report to my quarters immediately. I'll be there in a moment. Scott out."

Kirk wondered about that all the way to Scott's cabin. Just before he got to the door he realized what the trouble must be, and he was properly - and more than necessarily - contrite when he walked in and found Scott waiting for him.

"Captain...." Scott began, then stopped and smiled with no humor whatsoever. "Ye know, I properly shouldna be callin' ye 'Captain,' but no one's had time ta stop an' determine just what yer rank is noo."

"I know," Kirk answered woodenly. Whatever it is now, it's doubtless going to be a lot less when you're done, he thought. You figure it out. You're in charge.

"Aye, yon's the problem. 'Tis an unusual situation we're in, somethin' no' covered by the book. 'Tis growin' hard ta tell just what rank is anymore, what wi' bein' sa short-handed an' havin' ta make do wi' the Anarchists about. Nonetheless..." His voice suddenly crackled. "Nonetheless, some things we've got ta maintain. If we let a' discipline go, we'll be no better than the Anarchists oorselves."

What's wrong with that? Kirk caught himself thinking, and was promptly horrified. "I know," he said again.

"A'right then, ye understond that I'm in charge noo. Ye've just got ta get oot o' the habit o' bein' Captain, no matter what title ye're called by." He paused, watching Kirk flick one hand quickly across his empty eye-socket, and went on in a gentler tone. "Dommit, Jim, I'm sorry as hell for wha's happened, but thot doesna change the facts. Ye're no' the Captain anymore, an' I must be. Ye canna go about replacin' the mon I put in charge on the bridge! I put DeSalle there for a reason, an' if I thought I could ha' put yerself there, I would ha' done thot instead. Ye had no business takin' command away from him!"

"I didn't mean to!" Kirk burst out. "I was trying to lure the Anarchists off the bridge - DeSalle was plainly having trouble with them - when that damned space-amoeba showed up. After that.... Scotty, it was an emergency situation! We all reacted automatically. I suppose DeSalle told you how I almost pushed him off the con...."

"No, he didna. Go on."

"He didn't...? Well, I went for the Helm position. It seemed to be the only...logical...place.... Oh hell, Scotty, you know the usual command sequence - I mean, the way you move up the ranks when you're wearing a gold shirt."

"Aye, I know."

"All right, then. It was automatic. I took the helm and acted according to my training. Admitted: I changed course, yanked the ship out of danger, put on the cloaking device, everything, without waiting for DeSalle to say the words. I didn't think of it at the time, because there wasn't time to think about it. I knew - we all did - what had to be done, the only things we could have done. I honestly don't think that DeSalle - or you - would have done it any differently under the circumstances. We just knew what had to be done, and we all did it without waiting for anybody to say the words. I know now that I should have waited for the words, but at the time...well, it seemed so damned irrelevant who actually said it first. The important thing was to do it. The reactions were automatic, as I said. I'm sorry."

"Aye, automatic," Scott repeated, watching Kirk closely. "Ye reacted accordin' ta the habits o' yer trainin'. I see. An' there was no confusion, no arguments, no time-wastin' questions, no dissension, nothin' like thot?"

"No. We moved, thought, reacted together. Perfect teamwork."

"Jim," Scott said in an odd voice, "I could easily believe thot o' the regular bridge crew; they're a' used ta workin' wi' ye. I saw thot meself on the day we left Earth. But last night the regular crew wasna there! The team ye had such fine teamwork with was made up o' no one but yerself and four Anarchists."

"Huh? But...Yes, but DeSalle and Jalina were there...." Kirk stopped as he remembered. Those two didn't say or do anything! We had them completely neutralized. It was just me and those four....

"Aye, thot's the question, Sir. Fer yerself, there were the habits o' command. But where in hell could the Anarchists ha' gotten such habits, eh?"

"I...don't know. Jenneth was there. Maybe...." How DID it happen?!

"Jim, you may ha' been runnin' on automatic pilot, so ta speak, but th' Anarchists were runnin' on nothin' but the instant's thought. Aye, by some miracle they did the right things this time, but what about next time? Noo that they've got the precedent, surely they'll try it again. Next time we might no' have such guid luck. They could disrupt the bridge at a critical time, an' get us a' killed. Ye know thot."

Kirk said nothing. He knew that Scott was right, according to every rule in the book. Yet somehow he was sure that the Anarchists wouldn't act like that, would never be disorganized in a crisis, would normally have that kind of teamwork - just as they always had ever since he'd first met them. He wanted to tell Scotty that, but he knew how stupid it would sound. He didn't have a shred of proof for the idea; he didn't even know how the Anarchist system worked. He had absolutely nothing to show that it could work, and the whole history of military science to show that it shouldn't.

Like the bumblebee, he thought. They used to say that, according to the known principles of aerodynamics, a bumblebee shouldn't be able to fly. But the bee kept right on flying. Finally they discovered a new principle that explained it.... Is it that way with them? Is there some principle we haven't discovered yet that keeps them organized? Jenneth tried to explain, once. It looked like an awfully fragile system.... No, it couldn't work without their special circumstances, could collapse at any time. Scotty's right. We've been damned lucky so far. "I...know it."

"A'right then, do ye see the harm ye've done?"

Kirk nodded silent capitulation, not wanting to meet Scotty's eyes.

"I've done what I can ta stop it. I've persuaded Captain Roantree an' her wee friends ta stay off the bridge when I'm no' there, so things are at least no worse than before - an' God knows, thot's bad enough."

Scott leaned back, turning chill and military again. "Ye may ha' done wha' seemed right at the time, but in the long run, ye've endangered the ship."

Kirk pressed the heel of his hand into his good eye, and wished he could crawl into a hole somewhere.

Scott saw that and winced. Did I hit him too hard? That last may have been a bit much.... Get this over with! "Weel, I canna let thot go. 'Tis a question noo o' what the proper punishment should be."

"'Reduction in rank and pay grade,'" Kirk quoted tonelessly, "Dismissal from the service or prison term not to exceed 40 standard years...."

"'...accordin' ta the severity o' the offense,'" Scott finished for him. "I dinna see thot the offense was sa severe, considerin' thot ye did perform the actions required ta save the ship from danger at the time. I canna afford ta put ye in the brig, not wi' us sa short on crew. As for dockin' yer pay, weel, none o' us is bein' paid right noo. Reduction in rank? Yon's a problem, since yer effective rank right noo is Actin' Chief Engineer, an' ye canna be spared from the job. I obviously canna report ye ta Starfleet Command. Thot leaves me only one course o' action."

Kirk hunched his shoulders, wondering if Scott was going to slug him, and half hoping that he would.

"Weel, Sir, since ye've behaved like one o' the Anarchists, I'll have ta treat ye the same way. Ye're hereby banned from the bridge - except when I'm there. Is thot clear?"

"Huh? Uh.... Clear." And that's all!?!?

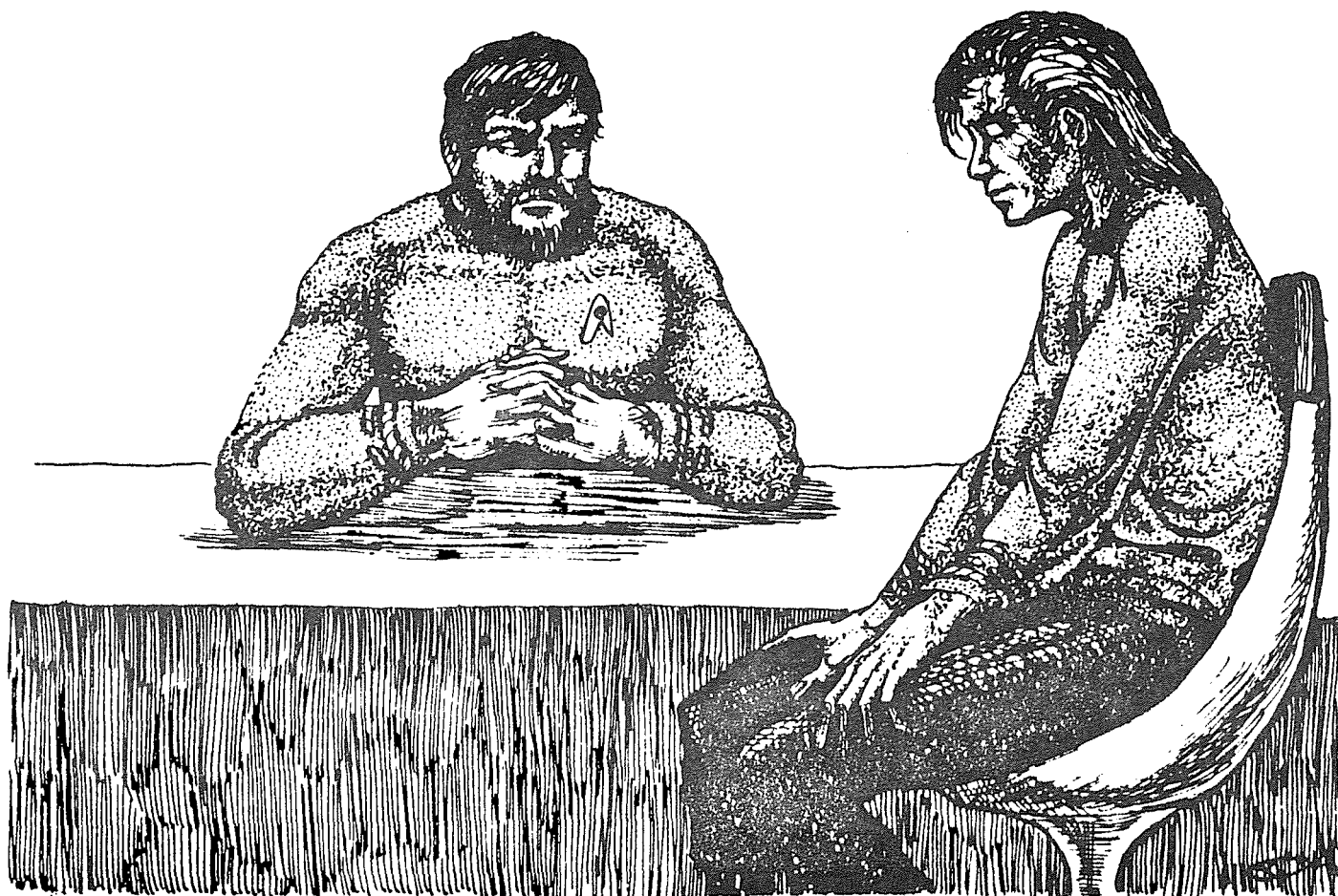
"Verra weel, then. Get on back ta yer post. We've a ship ta run."

"Yessir."

Kirk stumbled to his feet and headed for the door. Watching him go, Scott began to hate the whole command problem with an intense personal passion. "Jim," he called after him.

Kirk stopped, clumsily. As he turned to look back, Scott was struck by how thin, worn, and scarred he was. For the first time, the Engineer began to wonder if Kirk would live to get home. "Captain," he said, "I've agreed ta use Quannechota's course ta the Guardian. 'Twill take us an extra six weeks, but 'tis safe. We should have no further Romulan trouble. The lass did a fine job makin' yon map, and I'd appreciate it if ye'd tell her so."

"Glad to, Scotty." Kirk smiled a little as he left.



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Captain's Log, Stardate 6130.6.

RECEIVED REPRIMAND FROM ACTING-CAPTAIN SCOTT. CAN'T BELIEVE HOW LIGHTLY HE LET ME OFF...WON'T DO THAT AGAIN. I ALSO RELAYED HIS COMMENDATIONS TO QUANNA, WHO WAS 'PLEASED TO HEAR IT.' THAT WOMAN HARDLY EVER UNBENDS.

I'M BEGINNING TO APPRECIATE HER PLAIN, RAW BRILLIANCE. BESIDES CONSTRUCTING THAT MAP OF SAFE TERRITORY, SHE MANAGED TO DEDUCE WHAT THE THOLIANS WERE DOING WITH THE ROMULAN SHIPS HEADED FOR ORGANIA. ACCORDING TO HER EXTRAPOLATIONS FROM OVERHEARD BROADCASTS, SAYS SHE, THIS UNIVERSE'S ROMULANS LOOK ON ORGANIA AS AN ORACLE, AND THEY WERE CONDUCTING THE THOLIANS THERE FOR A 'READING.' AMAZING.

SHE STILL HASN'T GIVEN ME HER ANSWER TO THE OTHER QUESTION....

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Kirk actually enjoyed his turn in Engineering this time; the Anarchists were learning with amazing speed, the regular crew had gotten used to them, and the engines purred along happily at Warp 4 without so much as a feed fluctuation. There was little to do besides watch the engines behaving themselves and the other engineers teaching things to the enthusiastic Anarchists. It was a very satisfactory watch, and Kirk was whistling an old song to himself as he left Engineering - until he saw Jenneth Roantree waiting for him at the end of the corridor.

She was wearing her thoughtful look, and Kirk could guess that she wanted to talk to him alone. Without a word he led her back to his cabin. Roantree waited until they were settled at his desk with the obligatory pitcher of beer between them before she got down to the business at hand.

"Jim," she asked carefully over her beer-mug, "just what are your intentions towards Quannechota?"

"I want to marry her." It took effort to keep from bristling at her question. "I've fallen in love with her, and I want to marry her. Is that so hard to understand?"

"Frankly, yes." Roantree put down her mug. "We're not sure what marriage means where you come from. We know - you told us yourself - that you people don't marry triple, don't have Drones. We don't know what it's like to live like that. Your marriage customs are different, and we want to know how different."

"Fair question." Careful now. "No, we don't marry triple; just pairs. Exclusive pairs. We're strictly monogamous...." On Earth, anyway...most of it. "We don't cheat - I mean we don't have anyone but each other."

"No one at all?" Roantree gave him a slightly stunned look. "You mean, not at ALL?! Jim, how the hell do you people keep your gene-pool moving?"

"We don't have to! That is, the way we do it works very well for us. We can, uh, keep track of blood-lines that way."

"All right, I can see that. But you said 'exclusive'.... You mean, just not having children with other people, or not mating with anyone else?"

"Right on both counts." Chew on that, you...you punchboard!

"That's the damndest arrangement I ever heard of!" She looked definitely pole-axed now. "What do you do about people's inborn need for variety? What do you do if you're away from each other for long periods of time, or while she's pregnant? What do you do if one person needs more mating than the other one can manage?"

"There's always your good right hand, dammit!" Oops! Watch temper!

"I suppose you people are used to working it that way, but it's still the damndest arrangement I ever heard of." Roantree shook her head over another mouthful of beer. "I don't know how Quanna will take to that."

"I'll ask her myself." You mean, how will YOU take to that, don't you? Come on, ask me! I know you want to. The answer's no - you can't touch her once she's mine! "Anything else you want to know?"

"Plenty. How will the children be raised, for example. Do you keep them with you, or visit them around to relatives, or send them to boarding schools, or what?"

"Uh, we'd keep them with us, of course - as much as possible, anyway. I suppose if we went off on a trip we'd leave them temporarily with relatives."

"And how many children will that be?"

"As many as we can manage. I'd like a large family." Not that it's any of your business...unless....
"Of course, that's up to Quanna. I wouldn't want her to - to risk her health, or anything like that."

Roantree looked faintly annoyed, as if he'd somehow missed the point. "Yes, but what other family do you have? Any other marriage connections?" What about your other children, you dolt?

"Family? Oh, there's Mom, and...."

"Momma?!" Roantree jumped, spilling some of her beer. "Your...our mother, still alive?"

"Yes. Yes, she is." Chills scampered down Kirk's spine. He'd forgotten that in this universe his/her mother was years dead. "Look, Jen, when we get back to Earth - my Earth - I'll take you to see her. I'll make her understand, somehow. She always wanted a daughter anyway. I'll...."

"Not too soon," Roantree cut in, running a distracted hand through her hair. "Give me awhile to get used to this. Momma, alive...." She pulled herself back to the subject at hand. "All right, there's Momma. Who else?"

"Dad's long dead." Better get that out of the way fast. "So's Sam, and his wife, though their son's still alive."

"Pete? Little Pete? I never so much as saw his face!"

"You will now, I promise. Mom's taking care of him."

"Sam's kid, alive...."

"Yes, he is." We almost lost him. How would I have felt if.... No, never mind. "The rest.... Well, there's Aunt Helen and Cousin Max...."



"Oh no," Roantree whispered, pressing her scarred hand against her forehead. "Not those two! Dad and Sam dead, but them still alive.... Merde de cochon, there's no justice!"

"I warned you that it wasn't Paradise," Kirk couldn't help smiling. "I take it your Aunt Helen and Cousin Max are as disgusting as mine."

"'Disgusting' isn't the word for them," Roantree scowled over her beer. "They were the only members of Dad's family who came up from Iowa with him, and I always wondered why. Those miserable, whining, narrow-minded, backward, hypocritical, greedy...."

"I get the picture."

"I don't know if they were killed in the big raid or if they're riding the flatboats down the river with the other survivors. I've gone out of my way to avoid them for years." She finished off her beer and refilled the mug. "Here's hoping they drown."

"Don't I wish," Kirk agreed, taking a long pull at his own beer. He was getting a definite taste for the stuff. "One of the happiest of my childhood memories was the time I got back at Cousin Max."

"You too?" Roantree grinned. "How did you do it?"

"I lured him into deep mud, where he got stuck. He stood there and hollered for about half an hour, while I sat back and teased him with stories about people disappearing forever in quicksand beds. I scared him almost purple. It was gorgeous."

"Beautiful! I wish I'd seen it. How did he get out?"

"Oh, after awhile he realized that he wasn't going to sink any deeper, so he made a real effort to pull free. I remember he got his feet loose - with a wonderfully obscene sucking noise - but he lost his shoes in the mud and ran home without them, howling all the way. I got a real licking for that, but it was worth it."

"Marvelous!" Roantree laughed, lifting her glass in salute. "The best I could manage was to push him into a horse-trough."

"I promise, Jen, if Max is there when we go visit Mom, I'll show you where that mud-hole is." Kirk grinned until his scars pulled, imagining the the fun of turning Jenneth loose on Cousin Max. Yes, he decided, there are some advantages to having her for a sister. It could be a lot of fun. It would be so easy.... Why can't we get along? Why DO I have to be so jealous of her? Is it just Quanna, or something else?

"Agreed, but back to the point," Roantree cut into his thoughts. "When were you last married?"

"Uh, more than a year ago." Kirk fumbled with his glass, unsettled by the sudden change of mood her question brought on. "She died."

"I see," Roantree took a quiet drink of her beer. "Who's taking care of the children? Momma?"

"Children? What children?"

Roantree set down her beer mug so fast that it might have been dropped. Her face went dead-white. "My... Your children," she said, stiff-voiced. "A girl of eleven, crazy over gliders. A little boy, good with horses, just four years old. Jan and Cassandra, damn you! My children! Dead!"

"Jenneth, I...." omigod, she had...Four and eleven.... All these years I might have.... "My only child died...unborn...with Miramanee...." Quanna! "The one Quanna's carrying...that's all. I have no children!"

"Not even a bastard or two lying around somewhere!?"

"No!" Kirk snapped indignantly, before he stopped to think. "I always took precautions! Irresponsible... No! What do you think I am?"

"Childless," Roantree whispered, looking away from him. "So my children are dead forever."

"Oh." Kirk hunched down in his chair, finally understanding what Roantree had wanted, seeing another reason why she'd been so eager to get to his universe. "I'm sorry. I didn't know." There's a lot about you that I don't know, mind-link or no mind-link. But what will you do now? Will you turn against me? Against the whole mission?

"But the...your universe is crowded," she murmured, looking out into unfathomable distances. "People breed easily there. Lots of children...maybe too many. Maybe they don't feel the same..." She turned back toward him, face set and unreadable. "Jim, is it just Quanna you want? You said you wanted lots of children, but why? What does Quanna's child mean to you? Do you really want the baby?"

"Wha... Of course I do!" Kirk gulped as if her questions were hard body-blows, knocking something loose inside him. "I want lots of children, a real family, a woman who won't leave me, something more than this damned ship that I'm going to lose anyway..." What am I saying?! Shut up! He pressed a hand over his mouth.

"So that's it," said Roantree, studying his face. "You're like me that way, too: loving and losing, with so little to hang on to...."

Impulsively she reached out and took Kirk's hand. At the contact, the mind-link tightened. He could feel the tide of sympathy and grief pulsing through that touch, close and warm and catching him by surprise and it pushed open the gates of memory. Images poured out in a flood, too quick and strong to stop, faces and voices of everyone he'd ever loved and lost - beginning with his father, ending with McCoy and Spock, winding through long ranks of friends and lovers and a wife and an unborn child. He hadn't realized that there were so many. He ground his free hand against his eye, fighting back the sudden and outrageous need to cry like a child, like the child he'd been when his father had died.

"...So much alike," Roantree whispered, withdrawing her hand. "You've lost as much as I have - not counting a whole universe! And I thought I was alone in that..." She paused a long time, thinking. "Quanna would change that for you, and you can give her the one thing I can't... All right, Jim." She sighed and stood up. "If Quanna asks me, I'll suggest that she go ahead and marry you."

"You mean you'll give her to...." Careful! "You won't, er, try to discourage her? You'll just let me take her away...uh, in marriage?"

"That's what I just said," she assured him, marveling over how different the idioms of their languages were. She emptied her mug, set it on the table, tossed him a vague Anarchistic sort of salute, and walked out.

Kirk watched her go, not daring to say anything until the door whooshed shut behind her. The conversation had left him feeling very off-balance and unsettled; he knew a little more about her, but understood less than before. "Alien, he insisted. My face, a Human body, and a completely alien mind. She's not like any woman I've ever met... For a moment he thought of Shahna, the female gladiator of Triskelion - but no, that was no fit comparison. Shahna had been born and raised in slavery, and that was about as far as one could get from Roantree's background. He thought of Cygnus 14, the infamous Amazon planet, where the Enterprise had put in for repairs a couple years back and gotten a female-voiced computer with a penchant for calling him 'dear.' It had taken Spock two weeks to make the damned machine behave. He'd never actually met any inhabitants of Cygnus 14 - he'd been warned of its reputation and had stayed on the ship - but the crewmen who had taken shore leave there came back with some amazing horror-stories about lecherous, masculine, dominating women. Anyway, Cygnus 14 had a government, so one would be unlikely to find anything quite like Jenneth Roantree there.

...And I don't recall ever seeing anything like her people's family arrangements, he thought. They marry triple. They seem to value their mates and children. Yet they're completely promiscuous, and bisexual, and downright lecherous, and they seem to have absolutely no conception of jealousy... How can anybody live like

that? It's...unnatural. Their whole system's unnatural. Human beings can't really be happy living like that. Quanna.... She'll be happier with me. I'll teach her a better way, make her love me...only me.... How long before she comes back?

His breath caught in his throat and he coughed to clear it, noting that he'd been doing a lot of that lately. It felt like a mild chest-cold. He considered calling down to Sickbay and asking if they were busy; if they weren't, a check-up wouldn't hurt. He started to reach for the intercom button.

Gone! They're dead forever! The silent flood of grief hit him like a tidal wave. Jan...Cassie...Lost. I'll never see them again. Kirk gripped the edge of the desk, gasping with shock, no more able to hold off Jenneth's sorrow than he could fly. He could even pick up sensory impressions from her; she was in her cabin, alone, sprawled face-down on the bed and beating her fists hard against the head-board. He could feel the skin on her knuckles bruising and splitting, and the pain was nothing compared to the raging anguish of loss. Damn you, Jim! Nearly forty, no scars on your genes - why didn't you ever breed?

Kirk scrambled to his feet, hurried into the sleeping area and collapsed on the bed, knowing that if he didn't lie down fast he was going to fall down. He scarcely felt himself land; the sensory feed-back from her mind was over-riding his own. My children! Oh, my children! Lightning-fast images roared like a white river through his stunned mental vision: a big-eyed girl with a startling resemblance to Christopher Pike solemnly whittling a tail-piece of an elegant glider, a shaggy-haired little boy grinning triumphantly as he leaped his delicate-legged little gray pony over a fallen tree, memories of holding little warm bodies in his/her arms, of marveling at the utter perfection of an infant's tiny hands and enormous eyes.... Erased. Gone. Finished. A long soundless scream, and the image of a burning library. Oh Mother, burned to death! Burned....

Kirk writhed on the bedcover and pressed his hands to his head, trying desperately to keep his personality from blowing away in that howling internal hurricane. She had flooded his senses, and he could no longer be sure where his body was. He could feel tears scalding two eyes, breasts plattened against the mattress, fierce tactile memories that could never be his or any man's: great muscle spasms clamping around his body from the ribs down, like a vast fist opening and closing around him in a steady rhythm, impossible pains tearing and splitting and bursting him from the inside, smells of raw blood and vision gone to a red haze as his/her body tried to turn inside-out.... And all for this? Just to see them die? All for nothing. My labor's lost....

That was too much. He fainted.

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Project Tape R-133, Roantree recording.

THEY'RE DEAD. MY CHILDREN - THEY'RE DEAD FOREVER. DAMN KIRK FOR AN IRRESPONSIBLE IDIOT! IT ISN'T AS IF HE HAD GENETIC TROUBLE, OR NO FAMILY OR FRIENDS TO TAKE CARE OF THE KIDS WHILE HE WAS OFF IN SPACE, OR WAS TOO POOR TO FEED THEM! OH, I SHOULD HAVE GUESSED, WHEN HE SAID HIS UNIVERSE WAS CROWDED AND PEOPLE LIVED LONGER THERE.... I HAD TO TELL SPARKS AND QUANNA, BUT NOBODY ELSE. LET THE OTHERS KEEP THEIR HOPES UNSPOILED; THEY MAY BE LUCKY.

NO CHILDREN, AND NOW HE WANTS TO MARRY QUANNA BY HIS WIERD EXCLUSIVE CUSTOM, AND IT'S HARD NOT TO THINK OF HIM AS A ROBBER. HIS UNIVERSE HAD DAMN-WELL BETTER BE PARADISE IN ALL THINGS ELSE!

* * * * *

From far away Kirk felt a hand on his face and heard someone, a feminine voice, calling his name. Jenneth? He cringed. No...different voice.... He dragged his eye open and saw Quannechota leaning over the bed. He clutched at her hand and squeezed it tight, already shaking as he remembered how he'd gotten there. "Quanna, please," he heard his voice pleading. "Don't let her hurt me again! Not like that. Please...." What am I doing? Stop that! Never beg!

"How can I help?" Quanna asked gently, running her free hand through his hair. "Who hurt you?"

"Jenneth. Jenneth did it. Our minds are linked, and she - she made me feel - " Careful! They were Quanna's children too, in a way. "She made me feel everything that she was feeling, thinking, doing.... I couldn't keep her out, couldn't keep track of myself, I was just a channel for her.... Oh, that bitch! That bitch! Rape couldn't be any worse!" He pulled his knees up to his chest and gritted his teeth.

"Hush, hush, easy...." Quannechota murmured, stroking his face in a slow comforting rhythm. "What was she thinking that upset you so?"

"She...." No, don't tell that. Maybe she doesn't know yet. "It...wasn't so much what she was thinking... It was the whole idea of being mentally invaded, forced to feel...like her, almost as if she'd swapped bodies with me...." No! Don't say that! Don't even think.... Too late; the denied memories rose like a cold mist. He curled into a tight ball and shivered heavily.

"But why should that be so frightening?" Quanna asked, eternally calm and reasonable. "Look, you have come back to yourself and no harm is done. A brief time spent standing in someone else's shoes need not be terrible; it could give one great insight. It could be fascinating rather than terrifying."

"Not for me," Kirk insisted through chattering teeth. "She's a woman. There are things about that I shouldn't know, never wanted to know. Jesus, once was bad enough! I'm still scorched from it! And now Jenneth.... No, I won't go through that again! I...Janice...." Wouldn't that thieving bitch be happy if she could see me now! He let go of Quanna's hand and buried his face in his arms.

Quannechota sat down beside the bed, keeping her face on a level with his. "This has happened before?" she asked. "Before you met us, you were forced into telepathic contact with some woman?"



"No, not telepathic," Kirk muttered, raising his face to look at Quanna. "She...discovered a machine, a relic from some long-dead civilization. It could transfer a mind from one body to another, or swap minds between two bodies...and that's what she did to me." The shivering grew worse. How did I get started on this? he wondered. Why am I telling her about it? Why is it so easy to talk to her? "She stole my body, and she tried to steal my ship, and she locked me up in that - that wretched carcass of hers down in Sickbay, and I had the devil's own time trying to make someone believe what had happened because they thought I was her and she was crazy and...and.... Oh God, it was awful! I don't ever, ever want to go through that again! And now Jenneth is making me...." He hid his face in his arms and gulped for air. He was shaking so hard that he could hear the vibration of it in the mattress.

"But you did come back to your own body," Quanna reminded him, her fingers working down his back.

"Yes. The transfer wasn't stable. Neither was her grip on reality. They both gave way and we...snapped back to our own bodies. She went off to a hospital and I went back to my job, but it wasn't quite the same afterwards."

"She was in Sickbay?" Quanna considered. "This woman was ill in body, as well as in mind?"

"I think...yes. Yes, she was. It was terrible to be so weak, so helpless.... But that's just what she wanted me to feel. Lord, how that woman hated me!" He shuddered, still not responding to the gentle pressure of Quanna's hands. "She hated me, and I still don't know why. Envy, maybe...I had everything she wanted, especially the ship. But, dammit, simple jealousy wouldn't cause sick hatred like that! I couldn't understand it. Afterwards, before they came to take her away, I went to see her in Sickbay one more time. I asked her why she'd done it, and she said...oh God, the things she said!" He dug his fingers hard into his arms.

"How did these words hurt you?" Quanna asked calmly, moving her hands methodically down his taut shoulders.

"How?" Kirk gave a short, bitter laugh and raised his face towards hers. "For one thing, I couldn't do anything with a woman for weeks afterwards."

Quannechota did no more than nod thoughtfully, as if this was no more than one could reasonably expect. Nowhere did she show a sign of pity or disgust or amusement, much as he searched for it. Somewhere inside him, an old scar stopped hurting.

"Even when that passed, there were still the doubts," he went on. "To this day I wonder, really worry, about what it's like for a woman - going to bed with men, I mean. Especially with me...." He gave her a long searching look, still not daring to ask the question directly. "Quanna, please tell me; is it really that terrible? Does it hurt to be held down and...and invaded like that? Please, I've got to know."

For answer, Quanna gave him one of her rare smiles. "Strange," she chuckled. "Do all men worry about such things? I recall Sparks asking that question of Jenneth, several years ago. Mattered knows, a man of his size and weight would have more reason to worry that you."

"Uh-huh," Kirk agreed, trying to imagine what it must be like to lie under that huge shaggy body, even if those broad hands could sketch trails of fire.... Like being crushed, smothered, impaled.... He shuddered.

"I found Jenneth's answer quite memorable," Quanna went on. "She said, 'You're not so heavy that I can't throw you around if I want. As for the other, tell me who's 'passive' or 'active' when you eat a carrot. Is the carrot invading you, or are you gobbling up the carrot? One mouth hungers much like the other.'"

"Oh." Kirk choked down a whoop of near-hysterical laughter as he thought that one over. He could feel himself blushing from his toes to his hair. "Heh-heh - oh yes, Jenneth does have an interesting way with words! Carrots! Jesus...." How big do High Harbor's carrots grow?... Stop that. "Ho! Ho! Carrots...."

Quannechota rubbed his shoulders, noted that the trembling had stopped, and gracefully climbed into bed beside him. "I have always liked carrots," she said.

Kirk reached out for her and wrapped his arms around her hips. "Please stay with me," he murmured, settling his head in her lap. "You make me feel good, in so many ways."

"As simple as that?" she asked, running her fingers through his long, gray-streaked hair. "Is that why you want to marry me?"

He nodded, rubbing his head against her belly. "As simple as that, I guess. You make me happy, and damn little else does. You can loosen the knots I'm tied up in, make me feel warm and easy inside.... Oh, you've got to stay with me! I don't think I can survive without you." He hugged her very hard, wishing she would lie down beside him and let him wrap himself up in her arms and be comforted and safe.

Quanna slid off her heels and stretched out beside him, noticing how he clutched at her and pillowed his head between her breasts and practically plastered himself against her body. She moved her hands in slow deep circles on his back, and remembered the few times that Jenneth had been hurt and desperate like this. No, not quite like this, she considered. Not this severe. He is broken far down, almost to the limit of healing....

"I swear I'll be good to you," he whispered against her breast. "I was...not rich, but well off, and...respected, in my universe. I'll make a good home for you and the child...other children...make you happy...."

"Yes," she sighed. Jenneth wanted to do that too. "Yes, Jim. I will marry you."

"What?! You will? You...."

"By our rite while we are here, and by your rite - if you wish - when we reach your universe." She got up on one elbow and began to explain to him about High Harbor's wedding customs and procedures.

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Project Tape R-135, Roantree recording.

QUANNA'S GOING TO MARRY HIM. I SUPPOSE IT WON'T BE THAT MUCH DIFFERENT FROM WHAT IT'S BEEN THESE LAST COUPLE MONTHS - NOT QUITE AS IF SHE WERE GOING AWAY WHERE I'D NEVER SEE HER AGAIN.... I WISH I UNDERSTOOD JIM'S CUSTOMS BETTER. AT TIMES HE'S INEXPLICABLE. THE WAY HE ENVIES ME... NO, THAT I CAN UNDERSTAND. MAYBE LIVING WITH QUANNA WILL MAKE IT UP TO HIM, SOMEHOW. SHE'S A BIG STRONG GIRL, AND SHE CAN HANDLE HIM. WE'LL HAVE THE CEREMONY TOMORROW.

* * * * *

The word had spread all over the ship, and the sheer number of wedding-guests made it impossible to have the ceremony anywhere but on the hangar-deck. Kirk, all too aware of the gawking and whispering, sweated and itched in his too-big dress uniform shirt and tugged his wreath of flowers down over his ears, and tried to concentrate on how striking Quannechota looked in her fringed white deerskin dress and wreath of flowers. She was smiling, a faint but definite smile, and she was as beautiful as he'd ever seen her. He wondered how many of his own people appreciated her sudden loveliness, and ventured a quick glance around the packed chamber.

There was Scott, looking dour and worn and harried as usual; at least he wasn't disapproving and upset, as he'd been when Kirk had first told him about the wedding. There was Uhura, smiling politely, her face revealing nothing - and he looked away quickly. There were Sulu and Chekov, grinning and delighted, holding handfuls of flowers and reconstituted rice and just waiting to throw them. There was Christine, smiling hugely and wiping her eyes the way women usually did at wedding, which was somehow very reassuring. The Anarchists looked uniformly happy; it was the regular crew whose reactions were varied. Kirk overheard a snicker or two, a whisper about 'shotgun weddings,' some righteously defensive counter-whispers, and John Yellowhorse muttering about 'procupine-quill embroidery, typical Michigan-Indian pattern, quite notable on the dress....' while his tricorder hummed. Kirk hitched his shoulders a half-inch higher and wished the business were over and done with. He clutched the ring a little tighter in his left hand.

Roantree stepped up the hastily-constructed brazier and lit the fluid within, frowning a bit as the flames leaped high. Of course there was no proper firewood on the ship and they had to make do with what they could find, but still, a wedding-fire that burned from no solid material struck her as a bad omen. She tugged briefly at the length of rope looped over her shoulder, making sure that it would come away easily, and then waved the two celebrants forward. The flames lit their faces revealingly - Kirk nervous, Quannechota radiant, the usual look of a wedding-couple. Roantree smiled at them and chanted the ritual words.

"Have you come here of your own free will?"

"Yes." - boldly from Quannechota, stumbling and awkward from Kirk, as expected. Males usually performed poorly at such things.

"Then may the Mother of All Living smile on you...." All the ritual words, the good wishes for peace and health and long life, the direct pleas to the goddess for fertility, the injunctions to care for each other's children, while the bride beamed and the groom looked confused - a standard wedding, like the dozens she'd done before, and her own. Maybe the thrill is gone, Roantree thought, or maybe it's the pressure we're under, but somehow this doesn't seem real.... It's probably just me. I can't imagine being without her.

She pulled off the corn-husk rope and held it out, waiting while they exchanged rings and joined hands over the brazier, grateful that Sparks had briefed Kirk thoroughly about this part so that he could carry it off well. She tied the rope around their joined hands, taking special care to see that it was firm enough to avert the omen of that fluid fire. She lifted the ceramic cup and poured the water over their hands while they chanted the words together: "Through fire and water I come to thee; not fire nor water shall take me from thee."

"Then I pronounce you joined from this time forward." Roantree took care not to hurry the words, and the couple kissed and turned to face the crowd, and the cheers went up. Nobody noticed her visible look of dismay as she noted how the mere half-cupful of water was choking the ritual fire. Bad omen, she thought. This has all the earmarks of a very short marriage. Why? Will they divorce? Will one of them die? Or will they forget everything when time changes back? She felt the weight of a hand on her shoulder and turned to look into Sparks' worried face. He'd noticed the fire, too.

Meanwhile, Kirk and Quannechota made their way through the crowd, bombarded with various imitations of rice and a few real flowers and shouts of congratulations, looking happy and bewildered and trying discreetly to get the hell away from all these people. Ann Bailey led an impromptu honor-guard that managed to politely hold back the crowd while the wedding-couple slipped into the corridor and hurried away. Somebody announced a party in rec-rooms #3, #4 and #5, and the mob began to break up in happy confusion. Somebody else shouted questions about when and where to give the wedding presents, and somebody else innocently suggested the Captain's office. Roantree gave Sparks a dismayed look, and managed to whisper in his ear, "If this mob's going to their cabin, where the hell are THEY going?"

"Don't worry," Sparks grinned back. "I expected something like this, and gave Quanna an idea. They're going to the herbarium."

"'Her-bury-'em?' What the hell...?"

"That's what they call the big garden. Nobody'll look for them in there."

"Ah, good! I always knew I'd married you for your brains, Sparks."

"Really? I thought it was for my looks."

Roantree laughed and tugged his beard, beginning to feel much better.

* * * * *

I'M AMAZED AT HOW GOOD THE HERBARIUM LOOKS, DESPITE ALL THOSE MONTHS OF NEGLECT. SULU'S BEEN BUSY THERE, OF COURSE, BUT THE ANARCHISTS HAVE WORKED AT IT TOO, OR ELSE WHERE DID ALL THOSE RED AND WHITE ORNAMENTAL CABBAGES COME FROM? SOMEONE'S BEEN TAKING CARE OF MY PRIVATE CORNER; THE GLADIOLI WERE BLOOMING WHEN WE GOT THERE, AND THE HEDGE WAS TRIMMED AND THE ROSES WERE OPENING AND.... IT WAS ALL BEAUTIFUL. I DID THE RIGHT THING. I'M SURE SHE LOVES ME! I KNOW SHE DOES! EVERYTHING'S GOING TO BE ALL RIGHT NOW.

ONLY MINOR PROBLEMS TODAY: ENSIGN JALINA HAD SOME SORT OF HYSTERICAL FIT AND IS RECUPERATING IN SICKBAY. I'VE GOT A SLIGHT COLD. THE CABIN'S STILL CROWDED WITH WEDDING PRESENTS THAT WE DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO WITH. WELL, AT LEAST I CAN USE THE TOOLED-LEATHER BELT SPARKS GAVE ME; MY OLD BELT'S TOO BIG.

...THERE'S STILL JENNETH. I'VE GOT TO DO SOMETHING ABOUT HER BEFORE SHE DOES SOMETHING ELSE TO ME, GOT TO FIND SOME WAY TO KEEP HER OUT OF MY MIND. I'VE MANAGED HALF THE TRICK - CAN KEEP HER FROM SEEING MY THOUGHTS... NOW IF I CAN JUST KEEP HER FEELINGS FROM FLOODING ME.... I CAN'T CONCENTRATE ON WORK 24 HOURS A DAY, BUT NOTHING ELSE SEEMS TO SHUT HER OUT COMPLETELY. I DON'T KNOW ANYONE I CAN TALK TO ABOUT IT, EXCEPT JENNETH HERSELF, AND I DON'T WANT TO RISK GETTING NEAR THAT WOMAN RIGHT NOW. ALL I CAN DO IS KEEP MY MIND BUSY WITH WORK - OR WITH QUANNA - AND KEEP LOOKING FOR A BETTER WAY.

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This time Kirk saw it happen. It was the end of his watch and he was coming back from the bridge after handing in his report. DeSalle was coming up the corridor toward him, and a couple of Anarchists - Jean Battre-Le-Diable and a girl Kirk remembered as Hot-Trot Paula - were a little ahead of him, chatting in Quebecois. As the Anarchists passed DeSalle, Battre-Le-Diable made some comment about Citizen Scott being as grouchy these days as a bear in April. DeSalle jumped, turned sheet-white, gasped, "It's you!" and jumped on the astonished biologist. In an instant he had Battre-Le-Diable on the floor and was pummeling him seriously. Hot-Trot gaped



for an instant, then jumped on DeSalle. Kirk reached them before any damage was done, and pulled DeSalle away. Hot-Trot turned her attention to Battre-Le-Diable and helped him back to his feet. Kirk took DeSalle by the shoulders and shook him hard.

"Dammit, DeSalle, what did you do that for?" he snapped, angry at the man's senseless violence and worried by the wide-eyed look on his face. "Why did you attack that man?"

"He's my double," DeSalle blurted. "Tell him to get out of my mind!"

Kirk just stared at him.

"Est-il fou, ou est-ce que c'est le Hydrophobie?" demanded Battre-Le-Diable, understandably upset.

"There he goes again!" wailed DeSalle.

"What, speaking French?" Kirk demanded, giving the Lieutenant another good shake. "A lot of them do. That doesn't prove anything. And even if he were your double, that's no reason to fly off the...."

"What's the problem?" asked an all-too-familiar voice behind him.

Kirk flinched, turned, and looked into the puzzled eyes of Jenneth Roantree. He felt himself turning pale, and made a firm effort to keep calm. "Uh, DeSalle here seems to think that Jean's his double," he gulped.

DeSalle looked from one face to the other, and squeezed his eyes shut.

"Easy to disprove," said Roantree. "Jean's father was named Gilbert LaRousse - not DeSalle."

"Not him?" mumbled DeSalle, reopening his eyes and letting them wander vaguely. "But he said - I thought... If it isn't him, then who...?"

"I think you'd better go cool off," said Kirk, taking DeSalle firmly by the arms and muscling him down the corridor.

"Hmm, I'll see you later then, Jim," Roantree promised. "No rush."

"But what's the matter with him?" Battre-Le-Diable insisted.

"Probably le cafard," Kirk heard Roantree answer. "A lot of them show heavy signs of that...."

"But Sir," DeSalle pleaded half-heartedly as Kirk half-dragged him into a handy tool-closet. "I'm supposed to be on duty this watch...."

"That can wait a few minutes," said Kirk, firmly shutting the door behind them. "At worst, they can get someone else to take your turn. We're not THAT short-handed."

"But - if Mr. Scott finds out, he'll take my head off! These past few weeks he's been as grouchy as... as...." DeSalle looked sick.

"As a bear in April," Kirk finished for him. "Why did that phrase set you off? Is that what you were thinking just then?"

"Yes, Sir. That's why I thought it was him, reading my mind...or worse...."

"Worse?" Kirk picked up on that. "How 'worse?'"

"P-putting thoughts in my head, Sir. It's got to be one of them doing it. I'd never think of such things by myself, Sir! I swear I wouldn't!"

"Very...strange ideas." DeSalle actually squirmed. "Things like...like wondering what rank and discipline mean, anyway...and sometimes it doesn't make any sense to have one person do the thinking and everybody else obeying without thinking - sort of like having just one brain for several pairs of hands - and how much more efficient it is to have no up-and-down arrangement at all, but just let people do the jobs they're good at, so you get more of a sideways network with more brains actually involved, and - and sometimes when someone gives me a direct order I'm actually startled, and.... That's not me! I wouldn't think that way! I'm a career officer in Starfleet, and you know my record, Sir, and you know I'm not like that! It's got to be one of them!"

"Yes, yes, I know you're a good officer," Kirk patted DeSalle's arm. "Nobody's questioning your loyalty, DeSalle. Just the contrary, in fact. I think you may be pushing yourself a little too hard on this point. After all, a man's thoughts are his own business, and who hasn't had a few insubordinate thoughts now and then? Especially about Starfleet bureaucrats, eh? I know I have!"

"Y-yessir." DeSalle managed a sickly grin, very grateful to be reassured. "I guess it isn't that bad...."

"All right then." Kirk grinned back. "So even if you get an Anarchistic idea or two - maybe not from your double, maybe there's no telepathic connection at all, maybe we're just getting odd ideas from watching them - even so, there's nothing wrong with that."

"I...hope not, Sir." DeSalle slumped against the shelves and looked worried. "Do you think it's just that? Just watching them? No telepathy at all?"

"Sure. After all, there are only 42 of them, and 113 of us. We can't possibly all have doubles here, can we?"

"No...I guess we can't...." DeSalle considered that for awhile, obviously wanting to believe, but still worried. "You and - Captain Roantree are the only ones we're really sure about. But Sir, if I'm one of the unlucky ones, what am I supposed to do about it? How do you - I mean, how do I keep that Anarchist's mind out of my own?"

Good question! Kirk admitted to himself. At least I'm handling this better than he is. "The best method I've found is to keep yourself busy. The 'spillover' happens on an emotional level, so if you keep calm and busy, you sort of shut each other out."

"I see." DeSalle look tremendously relieved. "Thank you, Sir. I'll tell that to Marian - I mean, Ensign Jalina. Maybe it'll help."

"Ensign Jalina?" Kirk began to see a pattern there. "Is that why she's in Sickbay? Hmmm.... DeSalle, when did you and Jalina first notice that you were getting distinctly Anarchistic ideas?"

"N-not too long ago, actually. I'd say, oh, a little after that time you and Captain Roantree...well, sort of took over the bridge during my watch. Just seeing the way the two of you worked.... It was scary. I guess that's when we started watching for it, noticing odd ideas in ourselves, Sir."

"Aha." Power of suggestion! Call it telepathic invasion and that excuses.... Can't let this go on. "Look Lieutenant, you could be getting yourself worked up over nothing. You don't know that you have a double on the ship - in fact, the odds are strongly against it. So the Anarchists are giving you new ideas? All right, that's what this ship was made for - exploration. 'To seek out new civilizations,' remember? Well, we've sure found one. Not necessarily a bad one, either. You've got to admit that they're not bad people. Maybe some of their wierd ideas and customs could be valuable, better than the ones we have. Did you ever think of that?"

DeSalle just stared at him, face loose with astonishment. Kirk couldn't help chuckling. "In any case, Lieutenant, you're late for your watch. You'd better get up to the bridge or else call in unfit and report to Sickbay."

"I...which should I do?" DeSalle looked mortally confused.

"Up to you." Why can't he choose? Why is decisiveness so rare?

"Then...I guess I'd better get up to the bridge." DeSalle began pulling himself together. "If I call off work for such a lame excuse, Mr. Scott will snap my head off."

Kirk thought that over as he accompanied DeSalle out into the corridor and watched him hurry away. Snap his head off? 'Bear in April?' Scotty?! Maybe the pressure's getting to him. I ought to go talk to him. Can't hurt. A fit of coughing interrupted his thoughts. He decided to wait until he was over this cold, and headed off to his cabin. Besides, it was a whole four hours since he'd seen Quanna.

He was halfway there when he chanced to think of DeSalle again, and an oddity of the recent scene snagged his attention. Eight months ago I wouldn't have done it like that. He slowed and stopped and thought that over. No indeed, eight months earlier he would have ordered DeSalle off to Sickbay, leaving the problem to the doctors, and he would have been much more worried over the question of telepathic invasion - or subtle persuasion - especially from Anarchists. Then again, eight months ago I'd never met any, never seen them work, seen the advantages.... What the hell, eight months ago I never dreamed I'd be in a mess like this, desperately needing their help, their good will.... He shivered like a wet collie shaking water out of its fur, and wondered how much of what he was doing was tactically necessary, how much was simply adopting some of the Anarchists' better points, and how much was the result of telepathic spillover from Jenneth. I don't know, and there's no one I can ask. He plodded down the corridor in a wretched mood.

The scene in his cabin didn't make him any happier. Roantree was there, sitting at his desk, chatting comfortably with Quannechota. This time Kirk's bomb-in-the-gut reaction included a definite sensation of butterflies. I'm not, not, NOT afraid of her! he told himself sternly as she looked up at him and smiled. It took effort to make himself believe it.

"Hi, Jim. I've been waiting to talk to you." Roantree looked around for another chair, found none, shrugged, got up and offered him her seat. "You may as well sit down. This'll probably take some time."

"Sure," said Kirk, taking the chair. He couldn't help adding, "What were you two talking about?"

"I asked Quanna how you and she were getting along," Roantree answered easily, "and she gave me a long testimonial about what a great lay you are."

"As lusty as a stallion in spring," Quanna concurred, smiling.

Kirk didn't know how to react to that, aside from blushing furiously.

Yet he's still as bashful as a young boy in some ways, thought Quanna, noting the blush. "It is only fair that I give you equal opportunity to discuss me," she said, rising. "Besides, there are only two chairs here, and I wish to finish some studies. I shall return in two hours." She smiled again at Kirk, and walked out.

"I'm glad you're making her happy," said Roantree, dropping into Quanna's chair. "But to get on; there seems to be a serious psychological problem with your people, Jim. We'd better stop it before it gets any worse. Le Cafard can wreck a whole crew if it isn't quashed."

"What's 'le Cafard?'" Kirk asked, trying to think of where he'd heard the name before. One of my Military History courses, I think....

"Maybe you call it 'Stir-Crazy,' or 'Cabin Fever.' It comes of penning people up too long in too-close proximity, and putting them under pressure while not giving them much they can do about it. Hmmm, I think another name for it is 'A Case of Nerves.' Know what I mean?"

"I think so. You mean, like DeSalle jumping on Jean Battre-Le-Diable? There was a little more to it than that, Jenneth."

"Such as?"

"He wasn't kidding when he accused Jean of telepathic eavesdropping. He overheard Jean using a phrase that he happened to be thinking, and he assumed the worst."

"The worst? What...."

"Dammit, Jenneth, that's the ultimate invasion of privacy! Can't you understand that? Doesn't it bother you that - that I can pick up your thoughts?"

"But that doesn't happen all the time - only when we're feeling something very intensely, like your bad dreams...."

"Or like you grieving for your children," he added, knowing it was a brutal thing to say, but too angry to let it pass. "I couldn't shut that out. It bowled me over! Do you think that was easy to forgive?"

Roantree gave him a long look that took him several seconds to decipher. When he understood that it was pity, he didn't know whether to kick her or himself.

"Jim, I'm sorry I put you through that," she said, "but please understand that it wasn't something I could help, not just then. It was bad enough to see the library burn, then to learn that my children died there...." She looked away. "All these months, hanging onto the hope that they'd be alive in your universe.... Now my hope's gone. How in hell did you expect me to feel? What did you think was going to happen, after you told me?"

"But I couldn't block it out, couldn't fight it," Kirk insisted. "It damn near killed me! Can't you understand? I lost a child once, and a wife. Do you think I wanted to feel that again?"

"That's a damn cheap price for a family," Roantree snarled, turning back to him. Her face was tight with pain. "You have the one person I love best in this universe, and you won't let me touch her again, and you can always have more - children and I can't!"

"Huh?"

"I can't have any more." Roantree lowered her eyes and rubbed a tattooed hand across her chin. "Two years ago. Late miscarriage. Scarred me up inside. I can't.... You were the last hope."

"I'm sorry," Kirk whispered, his outrage dissolved and replaced by a feeling of icy-footed elves running up and down his spine. Sterile. Will that happen to me? Or something like it...maybe already. That long bout of impotence after Janice.... Don't think of that.

Roantree shook herself - exactly like a wet collie - and moved on to the business at hand. "Anyway, our personal problems don't have that much bearing on this. So far, we haven't found one other definite case of parallel-people, so the telepathic-invasion angle is pretty remote. I suspect that's just a symptom, an excuse for flying off the handle. We've got to get after the real problem, which is this rampant Cafard epidemic among your people. I want to know what's causing it, and what we can do about it."

"MY people?" Kirk caught that. "It isn't bothering yours?"

"No. My people are so busy learning...about their jobs, the ship, everything they can find out about this universe of yours...they don't have much time to brood. Besides, we were trained to get along in a much more cramped ship; to us, the Enterprise is enormous. We don't feel crowded at all. Finally, you can't discount the fact that to us this whole flight is a high adventure and a religious quest. For my people the common moods are curiosity, cheerful business, elation and contented exhaustion. We're doing all right. But why are your people having such a hard time? Where's the problem, Jim?"

Most of our problem is you! Kirk thought, hiding behind a sudden fit of coughing. The strain of hiding the truth is running us ragged.

"One thing I've noticed," Roantree went on, "is that your people act frightened - almost guilty - around us. It's as if they'd all committed some great crime, and they're afraid we'll discover it. Have you seen anything like that?"

Oh-oh. "Hmmm, I'm not sure...." Think! Think fast! "It could be, er, because they abandoned me and the ship all those months, and they're sorry for it."

"Could be," Roantree considered. "But that should have worn off by now. Besides, that would make them act guilty toward you - not us. I think it must be something else...." She frowned and thought, while Kirk clutched his hands in his lap and carefully kept his mind blank. "Hmmm...Jim, do you have any idea how your people lived, what happened to them, all those months that they were on Earth? Did they do something down there that they're secretly ashamed of?"

"I'm not sure," Kirk stalled, a wild idea beginning to take form. "I've had a few hints. I know that they were miserably unhappy.... Maybe I'd better ask Scotty exactly what happened down there." Collaborate. Get our stories straight. Toss another red herring.

"Right," Roantree agreed. "If anyone would know, he would. Light knows, he's been acting worse than any of them: snappish, short-tempered, downright bossy, and I think he drinks too much. By all means, let's call him." She reached for the intercom.

"Wait, wait!" Kirk stopped her. "He's probably not in his cabin - he usually checks the engines before he turns in - there's no telling where he is right now. Let me go hunt him up, or talk to him tomorrow. Ah, besides, he'd probably be more willing to talk to me alone - especially if he did do something wrong during those months on the ground. Don't push him, Jen. Let me deal with it." He started coughing again.

"Okay," Roantree acquiesced, withdrawing her hand from the dangerous button. "You go find out, then get back to me, and we'll see what we can do. While you're at it, shouldn't you drop into Sickbay and get something for that cough?"

"It's only a cold; it'll pass." I'd rather not see M'Benga, thanks. Maybe later, when nobody's there but Christine....

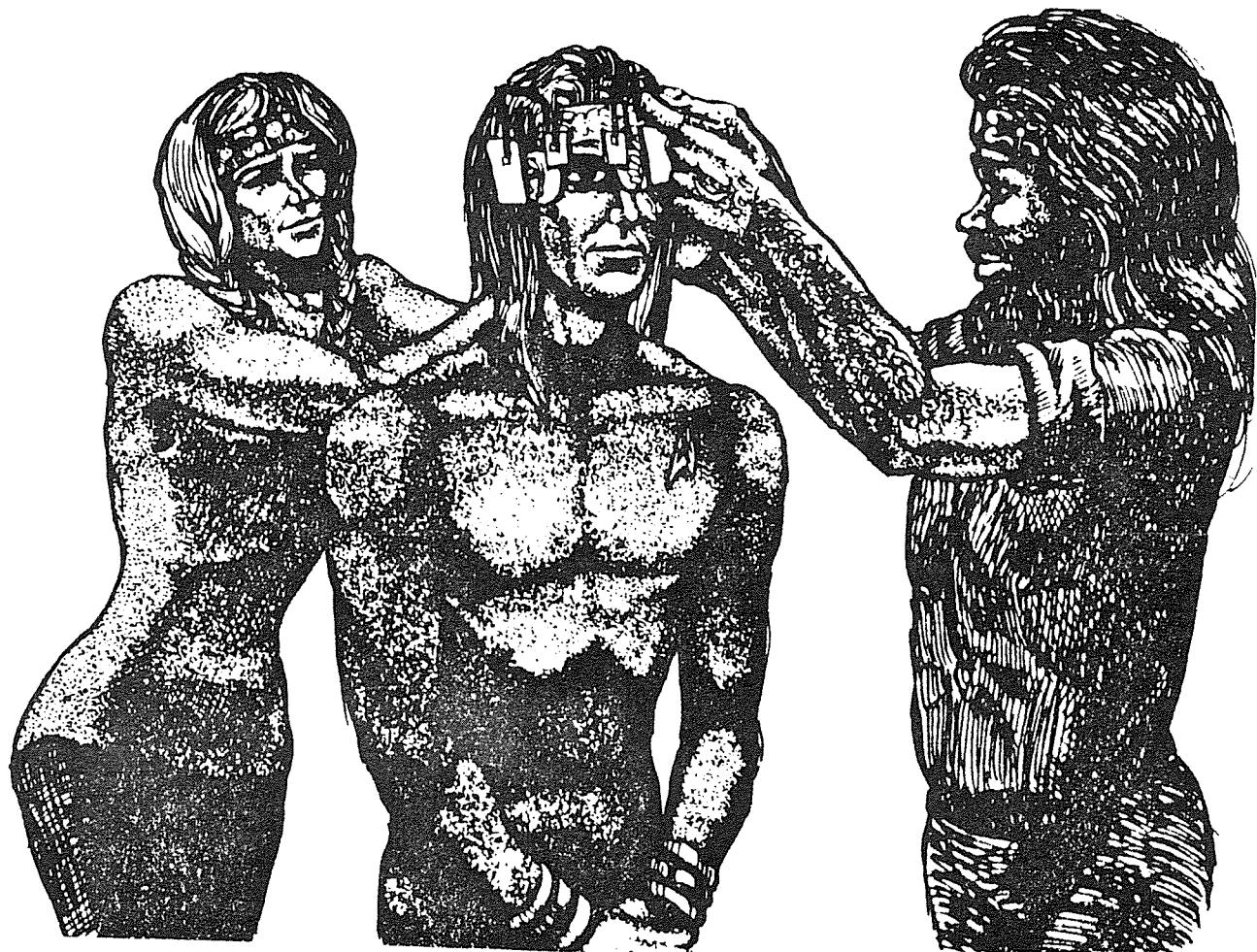
"Up to you." Roantree got up, stretched, and turned toward the door. "Remember, let me know as soon as you learn anything definite."

Just then the door whooshed open and Sparks came barrelling in, all flying hair and beaming grin, a shaggy whirlwind with a voice like a foghorn. "Hey, Brother Jim, look what I've got for you!" he bellowed, holding out a tooled-leather strap with assorted small reflectors hanging from it. "A good Crown-of-Mirrors - best I've ever made. Try it!"

"Crown-of-Mirrors?" Intrigued, Kirk took the tooled strap, noting with a smile that the leather had been carved into meandering patterns of oak leaves and acorns. "How do I put it on?"

"Here," Roantree smiled, a little wistfully. "I used to do this for Chris...." She slipped the strap around Kirk's head, pulled his hair out of the way and adjusted the buckle. Sparks studied the arrangement of the six pendant mirrors that encircled Kirk's good eye, and realigned them this way and that until he was satisfied with the result. The two stepped back, grinning expectantly.

Kirk looked out at them through the bracketing mirrors, feeling distinctly odd. He shook his head a few times, but the strap and mirrors stayed firmly in place. He focused on the mirrors, noticing that they reflected objects to either side of him as well as ahead. The forward-view mirrors had regular lines cut in the glass, like graduation marks on a thermometer. He noticed that distant objects showed on the mirrors at different marks than close objects did. "Wh - why, it's a substitute for parallax! I can see how far away



things are, almost as good as having two eyes, and peripheral vision, and...." Maybe Scotty will let me back on the bridge now.... "I...don't know what to say...."

"Just plain 'thanks' will do fine," said Sparks, sitting down beside him and amiably dropping a bear-like arm across his shoulders.

"Thanks," Kirk whispered, too full-throated to think of anything else.

* * * * *

Project Tape R-139, Roantree recording.

IT WORKS. QUANNA WAS RIGHT; THE CROWN-OF-MIRRORS CHANGED KIRK'S MOOD SO QUICKLY THAT I WOULDN'T HAVE BELIEVED IT IF I HADN'T SEEN IT MYSELF. LORD OF LIGHT, BUT IT SEEMS LIKE AGES SINCE I LAST SAW THAT MAN REALLY SMILE! WE LEFT HIM PLAYING WITH HIS NEW TOY, AND WENT TO DINNER.

QUANNA WASN'T THERE - PROBABLY STILL UP ON THE BRIDGE - AND NEITHER WAS SCOTT, SO THE CONFERENCE WILL HAVE TO WAIT UNTIL TOMORROW NIGHT. BUT WE DID SEE ANOTHER CABIN-FEVER OUTBREAK, RIGHT THERE IN THE DINING ROOM. ONE OF THE ENGINEERS JUMPED UP AS HOT-TROT CAME IN, RAN OVER TO HER, AND INSISTED TEARFULLY THAT SHE WAS HIS LONG-LOST SWEETHEART. PAULA HANDLED IT WELL; SHE EXPLAINED THAT SHE DIDN'T RECOGNIZE HIM, BUT PERHAPS SHE MIGHT FIND SOMETHING FAMILIAR IN HIS LOVE-MAKING, SO THEY SHOULD GO TO BED. HE AGREED, AND THEY WALKED OUT TOGETHER. I MUST ASK HER ABOUT THE RESULTS.

COULD THE PROBLEM BE AS SIMPLE AS INSUFFICIENT SEX? BUT WHY? DID THEY ALL CATCH SOME EMBARRASSING DISEASE DOWN THERE, AND HAVE TO STAY CELIBATE UNTIL THEY WERE CURED? THAT MIGHT EXPLAIN SOME OF THEIR ODD PRISSINESS AND WEIRD EXCLUSIVITY...BUT THAT WOULDN'T APPLY TO KIRK. MAYBE I SHOULD TALK TO THEIR CHIEF NURSE. I CERTAINLY CAN'T TAKE IT TO M'BENGA; HE WON'T TALK TO JEAN BAPTISTE-LE-DIABLE, AND HE AVOIDS ME AS IF I WERE A PLAGUE-CARRIER. LUNA, BUT THESE PEOPLE ARE STRANGE!

* * * * *

Scott flipped over a page in his last technical journal, and then another, and another, and finally shut off the viewer. He shook his head, wondering what had happened to his ability to concentrate, and reached automatically for the glass. It was empty. Hey, how many is that, now? Worried, he turned the bottle to look at the grease-pencilled gradation marks. Three? Already? How did I lose track? This is the fourth time.... He shoved the bottle away from him with something close to horror. Get out of here! Find something to do. Check the bridge....

He got up clumsily, bumping into the desk. For an instant he worried about his coordination, then decided that he couldn't possibly be that drunk on three drinks. A brisk walk would cool him off. In fact, so would a brisk climb. He hadn't checked the bridge emergency-stairwell in weeks; a quick scramble up that long tube would do nicely for exercise, and would get him to the bridge just as well. Feeling a little better, he marched out into the corridor.

Ten minutes later, panting his way up the long narrow stairwell, he began to have second thoughts. For some reason he'd gotten out of condition, and the climb was a little tougher than he'd expected. Also, the tall bare metal tube had odd acoustic properties - sounds from the bridge came echoing down it, eerily distorted by reverberation - and in the sullen twilight of the maintenance-lights the effect was distinctly unnerving. Determined to shake off his bad mood, Scott concentrated on sorting out the sounds as he climbed. It grew easier as he passed Deck 3; there was talk on the bridge now, and he could begin to make out what the voices were saying.

"...but why should I go? Pour l'amour des dieux, I just wanted to ask a question of the main machine-memoire...." The voice was somewhat familiar; yes, the Anarchist biologist/doctor - Battre-Le-Diable. What was he doing there?

"You just save it for tomorrow, when your...your teacher's awake!" That was DeSalle's voice, angrier than normal. "You know you're not supposed to be up here alone. Now get out before you damage the equipment!"

"Damage the equipment!? I'm not touching the equipment! I'm just talking to Quannechota, s'il vous plait. And I don't have a teacher, remember? There's the Chief Nurse, and the Acting Chief Doctor, and a grande armee of specialists, but no Chief of Biology any more, so I'm not apprenticed to anyone. Now fermez la bouche and stop bothering me." Battre-Le-Diable was somewhat tempermental, Scott recalled. Hope DeSalle doesn't provoke him, he thought, climbing a little faster.

"I should be able to obtain the answer to his question in approximately three and a half minutes," came a third voice, level and calm. Quannechota. What was SHE doing up there? "IF you can wait for that amount of time, I am certain that Citizen Battre-Le-Diable will leave once he has the information he came for."

"Oh oui, probably," the little biologist grudgingly conceded.

"Three minutes, nothing!" DeSalle's temper gave way. "You get off my bridge right this second, or I'll... I'll...."

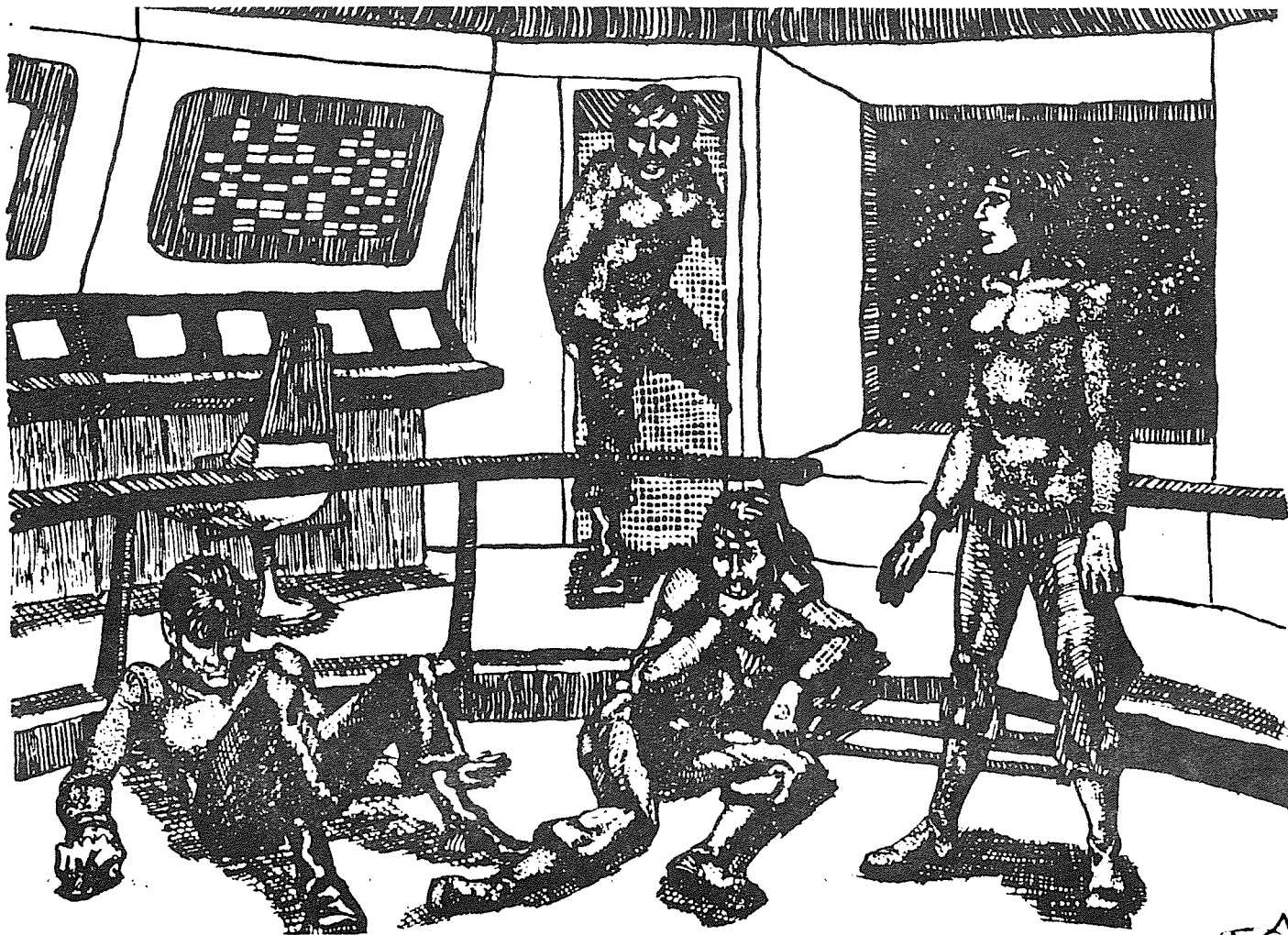
Oh Lord, please don't let him say he'll call Security! Scott prayed, scrambling up the stairwell. Don't let him give away....

"Your bridge?" Battre-Le-Diable bristled back. "What do you mean 'your' bridge? How many horses and cattle did you pay for it, toi le foutre des chiens?"

Whatever that meant, it was too much for DeSalle. "Tete de merde, I'll break your neck!" he shouted. There was a clatter of boots on the deck, grunts, slaps, inarticulate shouting.

"Not here, Citizens. Not here." Quannechota's voice was still level, but loud and carrying. "You may damage the equipment. Take your fight elsewhere. Go into the elevator."

The only response was more thumpings and grunts and curses. Scott practically flew up the last few steps. As he was clawing open the hatchway he heard, almost simultaneously two yelps and two heavy thumps - then si-



lence. He scrambled out onto the bridge and promptly saw two things; a pair of bodies lying crumpled on the deck, and Quannechota standing over them and turning toward him with a faint look of surprise.

"I heard.... They were fightin'...." Scott panted. "What did ye do ta them?"

"Throat-press," Quannechota answered calmly. "One presses one's thumb and fingers into certain hollows just below the jaw and to either side of the windpipe, thus blocking the carotid arteries. It can be used to stun when applied briefly."

"Aye," Scott gulped, looking at the two bodies on the floor. Battre-Le-Diable was moaning softly, beginning to come around, but DeSalle was still out cold. "I heard 'em fightin'...."

"Apparently a clash of personalities. To avoid prolonging the trouble they should be allowed to finish their dispute in a safer place. I stopped them only because they insisted upon fighting up here, where they might have damaged the equipment. Will you help me escort them to the elevator?"

"Aye," Scott mumbled, unable to think of anything better to do. "Take 'em doon ta...hmmm, I think life-support's on in the gymnasium. If not, then one o' the rec-rooms...." Wait! What am I doing?! Encouraging a brawl? Let them cool their heels in the brig - No, no can't let the Anarchists know about.... But where? What? How.... "Ah, better still, take 'em doon ta Sickbay. They may ha' hurt each other a bit." Call M'Benga as soon as she's gone. Tell him to keep them both asleep until morning.

"Yes, sensible," Quannechota agreed, turning back to Battre-Le-Diable. She took him under the arms, hauled him to his feet, unceremoniously frog-marched him into the turbolift and dropped him on the floor. She turned and gracefully slipped out of Scott's way as he dragged DeSalle into the turbolift and deposited him beside the little biologist. Scott stepped back and waited for her to get in with them. She gave him a questioning look, but didn't move.

"Come on, Lass," Scott nudged. "Ye've got ta go along with 'em."

"No reason," she answered. "They will not regain the ability to fight for approximately seven minutes more, and the elevator will reach the Sickbay level in one and a half minutes. A quick call to Sickbay will provide someone to receive them at the elevator door. Besides, I cannot leave now."

"What do you mean, ye canna leave?"

"I am awaiting some valuable information from the computer, which should...." Opportunely, the computer beeped. "In fact, there is my answer now." She turned from the turbolift and started toward the console.

"Wait. Wait a minute." Scott stopped her. "Ye'll have ta leave it for tomorra. Ye know ye're no' supposed ta be up here wi'oot yer...teacher, senior expert.... Och, ye know what I mean! Ye shouldna ha' come up here this time o' night in the first place. So go along wi' them noo."

"But Citizen, the apprentice status does not apply to me." Quannechota looked faintly puzzled. "Have you forgotten that I am the senior expert on the bridge computer?"

"Wh....what?" Scott leaned on the doorframe, inadvertently holding the turbolift doors open. "I dinna remember any.... Since when are ye the 'senior expert' on yon science station? We've plenty o' science staff on the ship!"

"Yes, of course," she answered patiently, "but for some reason there is no one here who could teach me as much about the computer as I could learn from the computer itself. I appear to have a talent for it which no one else shares, and I have managed to gain more skill with it than anyone else available. Surprising as it seems, I am now the senior expert on matters concerning the bridge-computer. Therefore I have no teacher, am not an apprentice, and the agreement concerning apprentices on the bridge does not apply to me."

"What? Ye expect me ta believe thot? Wi' all the trained science personnel we've got on this ship, ye're tryin' ta convince me thot ye're the one best qualified ta run the computer? What kind o' fool do ye think I am?!"

Quannechota raised one expressive eyebrow. "I do NOT expect you to believe it," she said, "not without corroborating evidence. You may obtain that from the science staff. I believe one or two of them should be in the electronics laboratory at this hour, should you wish to call them." She gestured toward the unoccupied communications board.

"Aye, we'll see aboot this," Scott growled, stamping over to the console. He studied the board a moment, then punched the buttons that connected him to math lab - not electronics, where she probably had some friends waiting - just math. Nobody answered. He tried Computer Maintenance and got an assistant repairman who could not tell him anything except that Quannechota had bothered him a few times with questions he often couldn't answer, and where did that savage learn so much about computer technology anyway? Scott hung up on him and grimly called Electronics. This time he got someone he knew was reliable - Lt. Davis, one of Spock's immediate staff, formerly, and nobody's Anarchist. "Och, Davis, I'm glad 'tis you," Scott growled sneaking a faintly-gloating look at Quannechota. "What's a' this bull about Quannechota bein' the 'senior expert' on the computer?"

Dead silence answered.

"C'mon, dommit! Where did yon crazy story get started?"

"Uh, here, I guess." Davis cleared his throat nervously. "You know, not everyone beamed back aboard and Mr. Spock always handled the main computer-work, and we really didn't have anyone else of his caliber, and the woman's some sort of a genius, and she proved very thoroughly that she really does know that computer up and down, and...."

"Begod, is this a ship full o' fules?! Are ye seriously tryin' ta tell me thot there's no one on the whole domned ship wha' knows the computer better than this...this...." Careful! She's right behind me!

"W - well, Sir, bear in mind that we're all specialists in our own fields, and aside from a few repair-technicians nobody else has specialized training or experience in computers, at least not to that degree, and it was always Mr. Spock who took care of such things before, and the rest of us can get information out of the computer as we need it, but she can practically make the damned thing sit up and do tricks, and after five months of playing around with it she's gotten awfully good with it, and she wasn't exactly uneducated to start with, and...."

Scott quietly shut off the intercom.

"May I resume my work?" Quannechota asked, not the slightest hint of triumph in her voice.

"No...oh no...." Scott whispered, shaking his head slowly. He was looking straight at Quannechota, but not really seeing her. His inner sight was filled with a vision, a horrifying revelation about the nature of command. There was a weakness, a double-edged flaw worked deep into the pattern, a two-way fault in the whole idea of one-man-rule of a ship or a department or anything else. Bottleneck! Command bottleneck! Im-
passe.... Bad enough if the one-man-at-the-top was incompetent; his subordinates could still manage the work, cover for him to some extent, work efficiently wherever his orders didn't cover. But if the commander were super-competent, a rare genius, an expert beyond the hope of his subordinates - what then? Yes, a commander could be too good at his job, so good he had no successor.

It was always Spock on that computer. None could match him, much less replace him. No chance of promo-
tion that way.... So no one tried! The Science staff specialized in other things, specialized away from him,
away from each other, away from that computer. He alone touched upon all their fields, co-ordinated...and
knew the computer best. Now that he's gone there's no one else...no one but her.... There was no way around the chilly paradox; a weakness in the nature of command had put an Anarchist in charge of the science station. Command self-destructs...but their method hasn't failed yet...what if...?

Scott could see the pit opening before him, the Creeping Anarchy creeping up on him, and he was terrified at how very persuasive it could be. No! I'm in command! I must maintain this rigid position or all is lost! He slammed his mind shut on the dismaying vision and its treacherous conclusions, switched his fright to outrage and turned it on the immediate source of the disturbing thoughts.

"Ye domned usurper! Who do ye think ye are, bargain' aroon' here alone, makin' such trouble? Begod, get off the bridge, an' dinna come back 'til mornin' watch, when there'll be enough regulars ta keep ye from doin' damage. Get oot o' here this verra minute!"

"But why?" Quannechota insisted, giving him a slight frown.

"Because I said so! Get oot or I'll...I'll...." Scott suddenly realized what he was doing, and stopped in midsentence. He turned very pale.

Quannechota raised one eyebrow, looked him up and down, and without another word slipped past him into the turbolift. It took her a moment to un-jam the doors and let them slide closed. Scott watched her go. The images that stayed with him were the unreadable expression on Quannechota's face, the shocked stare from Battre-Le-Diable, and the look of dazed misery on the half-conscious DeSalle.

Scott waited until the hum of the turbolift died away, then plodded to the command chair and sagged into it. For several long minutes he did nothing but sit there, staring numbly at the viewscreen. The cat's out
of the bag now. The phrase tumbled over and over in his mind. Cat. Out. She'll tell. They'll know. What
to do? He forced himself to consider possibilities. Maybe Quannechota wouldn't tell - but that was unlikely, to judge from that last odd look. She'd probably tell Roantree first, and Roantree would tell the others. How long would that take? Maybe there was time to send some Security people after her, drag her off to the brig, hide her.... But how to explain the mysterious disappearance? And what if the attempted grab turned into a noisy shoot-out where all the other Anarchists could hear? And what about Battre-Le-Diable, who'd probably overheard the whole thing? No, sending Security after one or two of the Anarchists would set off a battle with all of them, and there were more Anarchists than Security men, all adequately armed and distressingly

well-trained. Forget that. What else? What can I do? What would Captain Kirk do in a mess like this? ...Why not ask him?

Scott jabbed the intercom button, paused for a second to choose the right words, and announced, "Citizen Kirk, please come to...Deck One."

Study Questions For A Nervous BreakDown

* * * * *

Project Tape R-140, Roantree recording.

IF THERE'S ONE THING I HATE MORE THAN BEING WAKENED OUT OF A SOUND SLEEP, IT'S BEING INTERRUPTED WHILE I'M BALLING. SPARKS DIDN'T CARE FOR IT EITHER. STILL, I'M JUST AS GLAD THAT QUANNA AND JEAN DIDN'T WAIT UNTIL MORNING TO TELL ME THIS.

LE CAFARD IS WORSE, MUCH WORSE THAN WE THOUGHT. COORDINATOR SCOTT HAS IT BAD. HE HAD SOME SORT OF FIT AND ACTUALLY BOSSED QUANNA, YELLED AT HER TO GET OFF THE BRIDGE, NO REASON GIVEN BUT, QUOTE, "BECAUSE I SAY SO," UNQUOTE - AND THEN HE TURNED PALE AND LOOKED AS IF HE MIGHT COLLAPSE. QUANNA DECIDED THAT IT WAS BEST TO HUMOR HIM FOR FEAR HE MIGHT GET VIOLENT, BUT THAT MEANT LEAVING HIM ALONE UP THERE IN THE CONTROL CENTER IN THAT CONDITION; SO BEFORE COMING HERE SHE GOT HOLD OF ONE OF THE REGULAR BRIDGE-CREW - THAT PRETTY LITTLE RUSSIAN NAVIGATOR - AND TOLD HIM TO GO UP THERE AND TAKE CARE OF THINGS. ANN BAILEY ALSO HAD HER INTERCOM OPEN AND OVERHEARD THE WHOLE THING, AND NOW SHE'S KEEPING AN EAR ON THE BRIDGE TOO, SO I DON'T THINK THERE'S ANY IMMEDIATE DANGER.



PROBLEM IS, WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO ABOUT THIS EPIDEMIC OF HYSTERIA? WE'RE NOT EVEN SURE WHAT'S CAUSING IT. QUANNA AND JEAN BROUGHT THAT DESALLÉ FELLOW WITH THEM - IT SEEMS THAT HE'D JUST FINISHED A SIMILAR ROW WITH JEAN WHEN SCOTT SHOWED UP - AND WE TRIED TO QUESTION HIM. LITTLE GOOD WE GOT OF THAT; HE JUST WAILED THREATS AND ACCUSATIONS AT JEAN, INSISTED THAT WE HAD NO RIGHT TO KEEP HIM THERE OR ASK HIM ANYTHING, OTHERWISE DID NOTHING BUT CRY. PATHETIC. I ASKED ABOUT THEIR GROUND COLONY BACK ON EARTH, HOW THEY'D LIVED THERE, BUT COULDN'T GET MUCH. HE MENTIONED SOMETHING ABOUT "ALWAYS BEING AFRAID OF THE NEIGHBORS" - UNDERSTANDABLE FOR A SCIENTIFIC COMMUNITY, PAINFULLY FAMILIAR - COMPLAINED ABOUT THE HARD WORK, HINTED THAT THERE WAS SOMETHING PECULIAR ABOUT THE WAY THEY WERE ORGANIZED, AND THAT'S IT.

JEAN SAYS THAT THE MAIN IMPRESSION HE GETS IS PARANOIA: ANXIETY, GUILT, SUSPICION AND SECRETIVENESS. I'M CONVINCED THAT THEY DID SOMETHING BACK ON EARTH THAT THEY'RE HORRIBLY ASHAMED OF. WE'VE GOT TO FIND OUT WHAT IT IS, IF WE'RE GOING TO DEAL WITH THIS.

IN ANY CASE, SINCE JIM'S PEOPLE ARE DANGEROUSLY SICK, WE HAVE TO TAKE PRECAUTIONS. WE'LL HAVE TO KEEP CAREFUL WATCH ON THEM, AND WATCHING OVER 100 PEOPLE WON'T BE EASY. WE MUST BE PREPARED TO LOCK THEM ALL UP IN PADDED ROOMS AND RUN THE SHIP OURSELVES, IF IT COMES TO THAT. IN ANY CASE, WE'LL HAVE A GENERAL MEETING TOMORROW, AFTER DINNER, AND DECIDE WHAT'S TO BE DONE.

* * * * *

As Kirk got into the turbolift, mulling over that strange message from the bridge, he found Chekov there ahead of him. They did nothing but give each other puzzled looks until the opened doors revealed that they were both going to the same place. As they stepped out onto the bridge, Scott did a classic double-take at both of them.

"What's up, Scotty?" Kirk was first to break the silence. "Why did you call me up here?"

"Uh, aye.... Captain, what the dee'il is yon thing on yer head?"

"This? It's what they call a Crown-of-Mirrors; it compensates for my missing eye. I guess it must look pretty strange, but it does help. Sparks made it for me."

"Sparks.... Aye. An' Chekov, what are ye doin' up here?"

"But...but didn't you want me, Sair? Quannechota told me to come here. I thought...."

"Quannechota.... Oh Lord." Scott rubbed his eyes.

"Scotty," Kirk insisted. "What's going on?"

"I've blown it," Scott almost whispered. "I lost ma head an' shouted at her, ordered her off the bridge. I've given the game away. Noo they'll all know.... But why did she send Chekov up here?"

"Wait a minute," Kirk stopped him. "Scotty, remember, you told me that Sparks had fixed the communications board so that everything said on the bridge can be heard all over the ship, at any open intercom?"

"Oh ma God! I didna think o' thot!" Scott turned as white as paper. "They've all heard - the fight, ma flare-up, even what we're sayin' right noo.... Oh, lost!"

"Look, Scotty," Kirk cut in, thinking fast, "I've been wanting to talk with you for some time, and this is as good a time as any. Since Chekov's here, let him sit on the bridge for you while we go off and have a private chat, okay?"

"Oh, aye. Guid idea. Mr. Chekov...." Scott got up and waved the little ensign into the chair. "Take care o' the ship, noo."

"Yes, Sair." Chekov settled into the chair in something of a daze. He didn't quite catch what was happening, and this was maybe the second or third time in his life that anyone had left him in charge of the bridge. Determined to do the right thing, no matter what, he glued his eyes to the screen and barely noticed as the turbolift doors whooshed shut behind the other two.

Down in Engineering, Ann Bailey listened a moment longer and then reset the intercom for Roantree's cabin. "All's well, Jen," she reported. "Vodka-boy is up on the bridge, and Big Jim just wheedled Mad-Plaid away for a quiet talk - maybe to throw a net over him. Everything's go. Can I get back to my studies now?" Roantree's reply made her grin.

Behind the locked door of his cabin, Scott explained everything. He was going over DeSalle's behavior for the second time when Kirk interrupted him. "Where's DeSalle right now?"

"I sent him ta Sickbay. Why?"

"We'd better get hold of him. He's involved in this, and any cover-story we use will have to cover him, too." Kirk punched the intercom and called Sickbay. A few questions informed him that DeSalle hadn't been seen there all day. Badly worried, Kirk switched the intercom to ship-wide and announced that Mr. DeSalle was wanted in Cabin C, Deck 4.

DeSalle showed up in surprisingly short time. He looked as if he'd been running all the way. He also looked as if he'd been through more than one kind of beating in the last hour. He slumped into the nearest chair and panted, not looking at either of the nonplussed officers.

"Lieutenant, give your report," Kirk snapped. "Where did you go after leaving the bridge tonight?"

"Sir, I...I didn't want to," DeSalle gulped. "She...Quannechota dragged me out of the elevator at Deck Five and pulled me down the corridor to Captain Roantree's cabin. They...."

"SHE dragged you?" Scott cut in, angry and suspicious. "That one skinny woman dragged you - YOU - doon the corridor? An' ye couldna do anythin' about it?"

"Never mind it, Scotty," said Kirk, impatient. "She probably had help from Jean. Let's get on with...."

"Sir, she did it!" DeSalle insisted. "No, that - that other Anarchist didn't help, except when she stopped at the intercom to call Chekov. She took me by the elbows and marched me down the corridor, and I couldn't throw her off. When I tried to duck forward and pitch her over my head, she just leaned back and rammed her knee into my butt. Damned near broke my tail-bone.... I just couldn't get away from her, Sir. I think she's some kind of mutant, or something. No natural human woman could be that strong!"

"That's an easy excuse for you being weak," Kirk snapped out before he thought.

"Sorry," DeSalle mumbled, sagging into a small miserable bundle. "N-no excuse, Sir."

"Weel, I'm inclined ta believe thot the woman's a bit weird," Scott consoled him. "But go on, Lad. Wha' happened next?"

"Captain Roantree was there, and Sparks, and Jean and Quannechota, of course. They sat me down and asked questions, strange questions, about why I, uh, had trouble with Jean, and whether many people in our crew had a history of mental illness, and how we'd lived in the ground colony - things like that. I didn't know how to answer them, Sir. I evaded the questions as much as I could, kept insisting that they had no right to keep me there, and after awhile they let me go."

"Och, puir lad, did they do ye any harm? Did they knock ye about, or threaten ye, or aught like thot?"

"N-not exactly, Sir. They didn't hit me, or shout, or threaten anything. They were very polite, in fact. They just kept asking and asking and asking...." He shivered.

"Lieutenant," Kirk insisted. "What did you tell them? Word for word, as clearly as you can remember: what did you say?"

"Uh, well, as near as I remember, I said that Jean shouldn't have been up on the bridge, and that when I told him to leave he called me a...a dirty name, so I lost my temper at him. They seemed puzzled at that. Puzzled! After what he called me! Those barbarians, no sense of shame...."

"Go on, Lieutenant. What else did you say?"

"C-Captain Roantree asked about our ground-colony, how we'd lived there, how we got along with the neighbors and so on. I didn't tell them much." He threw a harried glance at Scott. "I swear I didn't, Sir. All I said was that you...er, Mr. Scott was in charge, and we had almost no contact with the neighbors, and that it was a lot of work setting up the colony, and how hard it was to maintain discipline under those conditions..."

"You said WHAT?" Kirk bellowed. "What were your exact words?"

"I - I said: 'people get lazy and quarrelsome, and it was hard to keep any kind of effective discipline.' That's all I said.... Oh Bon Dieu, did I give it away?!"

"I don't know." Kirk got up and walked to the screen and back.

Scott muttered something in Scots-Gaelic and reached under his desk for the inevitable bottle. DeSalle put his head in his hands and didn't move until Scott shoved a full shot-glass at him.

"Oh shit," Kirk muttered, pacing back and forth across the cabin. "Acres of shit! They don't know, but they're suspicious. They'll probably have one of their meetings soon to discuss it. We'll have to have our excuses ready by then. Not impossible...they still don't know everything. Still, this is going to take a lot of work. Let me think...."

He stopped for another round of coughing. DeSalle and Scott huddled miserably at the desk, gulped down the third-rate bourbon that Scott wasn't even trying to ration any more, and waited for Kirk to come up with something that would save them.

"All right. I think I've got it," Kirk announced, coming back to the desk. "They haven't guessed everything; they still don't know that there are governments in our time-line, or that we're a military vessel working under Starfleet regulations. That's a hell of a lot to miss, and the fact that they've missed it shows how very innocent...er, ignorant they are. Remember, the last governments this Earth knew died out nearly three centuries ago. The Anarchists have only a historical memory of what governments and laws are; they've never seen the real thing, and don't know it when they see it. Hell, with the kind of historical memories they must have, they probably wouldn't recognize a government without salutes and jack-boots and trumpets announcing the latest orders from the Fuhrer! They don't realize that we're operating...or trying to, anyway... under military regulations. They just think we're sick."

"I FEEL sick," admitted DeSalle, refilling the glass.

"All right, so we let them go right on thinking that," said Kirk. "We've got to make them believe that, and also believe that it can be easily cured...or else, for all we know, they may decide to lock us all in Sickbay and run the ship themselves."

"Innocent takeover," Scott groaned, reaching for another drink. "They could do it, too."

"Curable neuroses... Damn, how **I** wish Bones were here! Hmm...Jenneth seems to think we're sick with guilt - not just for losing our own timeline, and not just because you left me alone up here...."

The other two hunched over their glasses and didn't look at him.

"She thinks that something happened while the crew was living on Earth, something you're ashamed of and don't want them to find out. All right then, let's give her something. Scotty, what did happen in those months down there?"

"Naethin' sa much...." Scott pondered into the depths of a half-glass of bourbon. "We settled on the island, fortified the perimeter...."

"How? Stockades? Guards?"

"Na, naethin' sa crude. We built a common wood fence ta disguise the force-field mounts. We set up the emergency shelters, then put a few wooden cabins an' barns aroon the ootside ta disguise 'em. We used the emergency generator at first, then built a few solar generators an' a big hydraulic-powered job - that's the one we had the trouble with. We fenced off part o' the water for that, and disguised it ta look like fish-traps. After that we started lookin' for ways ta replace equipment wi' native supplies - did some mineral scoutins, set oop a we ore-smelter disguised as a blacksmith's shop, things like thot."

"Uh-huh." Colonial settlement from an Engineer's viewpoint. "But what else happened? Did you make any contact with the neighb...the natives? Was there any problem besides the fire? How did the crew adapt?"

There was an instant's embarrassed silence while Scott and DeSalle exchanged looks. "Aye," Scott admitted, "we had a bit o' trouble on those points. The teams we sent oot ta study the natives did some o' their studyin' too well. They'd come back, like as not, wi' a herd o' livestock, several tapes o' information, an' headsful o' insubordinate ideas. A lot o' the ideas spread, an' after awhile we had a bit of a discipline problem."

"I see. 'When on an Anarchistic world, do as the Anarchists do;' so the Anthropology teams started going native. What did you do about it?"

"It wasn't just the Anthro teams, Sir," DeSalle cut in. "Most of the science department got in on it. About what you could expect from the Egghead division..... It almost got where you couldn't trust anyone in a blue shirt...especially the ones who'd been under Dr. McCoy's or Mr. Spock's immediate command.... Uh, I'm

sorry, Sir, but it really was like that. It was as if nobody knew how to take the place of those two, and their staff didn't know what to do without them except run around in circles."

Unnoticed, Scott squeezed his eyes shut and shook his head.

"Hmmm, understandable," Kirk muttered. "Like a wolf-pack breaking up when an especially competent leader dies.... In Command Training they warned us about that.... but go on, Scotty."

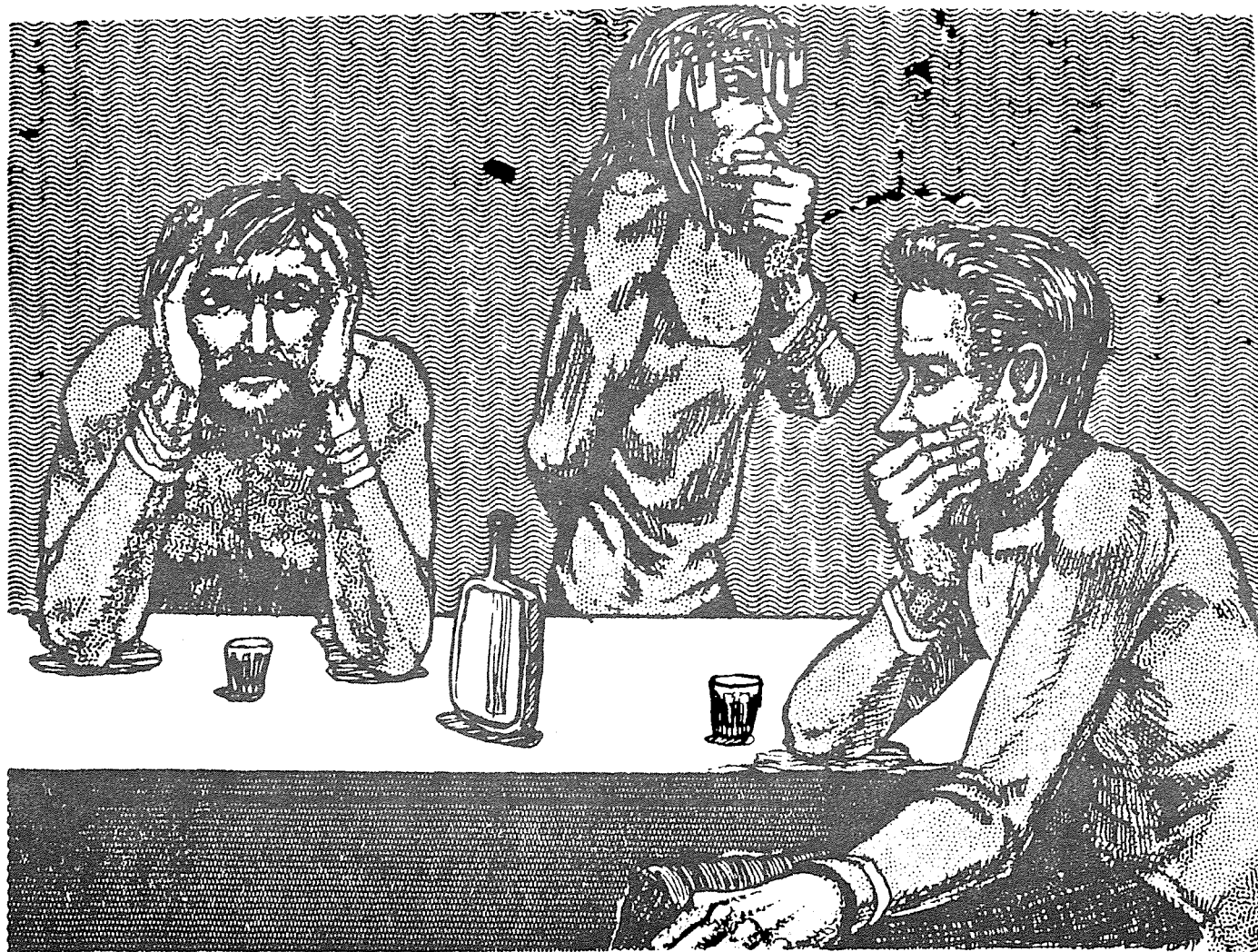
"Creepin' Anarchy, everra which way," Scott groaned. "Aye, I finally assembled the whole ship's company an' reminded 'em that we were Starfleet personnel, even if we were a' thot remained o' Starfleet, an' we were begod goin' ta act like it. Oor mission was ta restore Science ta the world, an' we had ta hurry at it because the Romulans an' the Klingons were oot there comin' for us sooner or later - an' we couldna do it wi'oot unity an' discipline. Then I said thot anyone wha couldna behave like Starfleet personnel was free ta go an' live elsewhere, providin' thot they could survive at a' in a world fu' o' science-haters thot would burn 'em as witches for the sake o' the knowledge in their heads."

"Did...did any of them leave?"

"Aye, maybe half a dozen. No more. The rest more or less resigned themsel's an' went back ta work."

"Were those the people who chose to stay with the settlement when the rest beamed back up?"

"No, Sir." Scott poured himself another glassful and fidgeted with it. "We might ha' been better off if they had. No, 'twas mainly Security...an' ship's-services-turned Security - wha chose ta stay. Thot was somethin' else entirely."



"Go on, tell me." It was distrust of me, wasn't it?

"It was trouble wi' the neighbors." Scott took a leisurely gulp of bourbon, as if fueling himself for a long run. "'Twas a windy day, an' the water was rough. There was a boatload o' fishermen - dinna ask me why they were oot fishin' in such weather - an' they lost control o' their boat an' crashed into the weir."

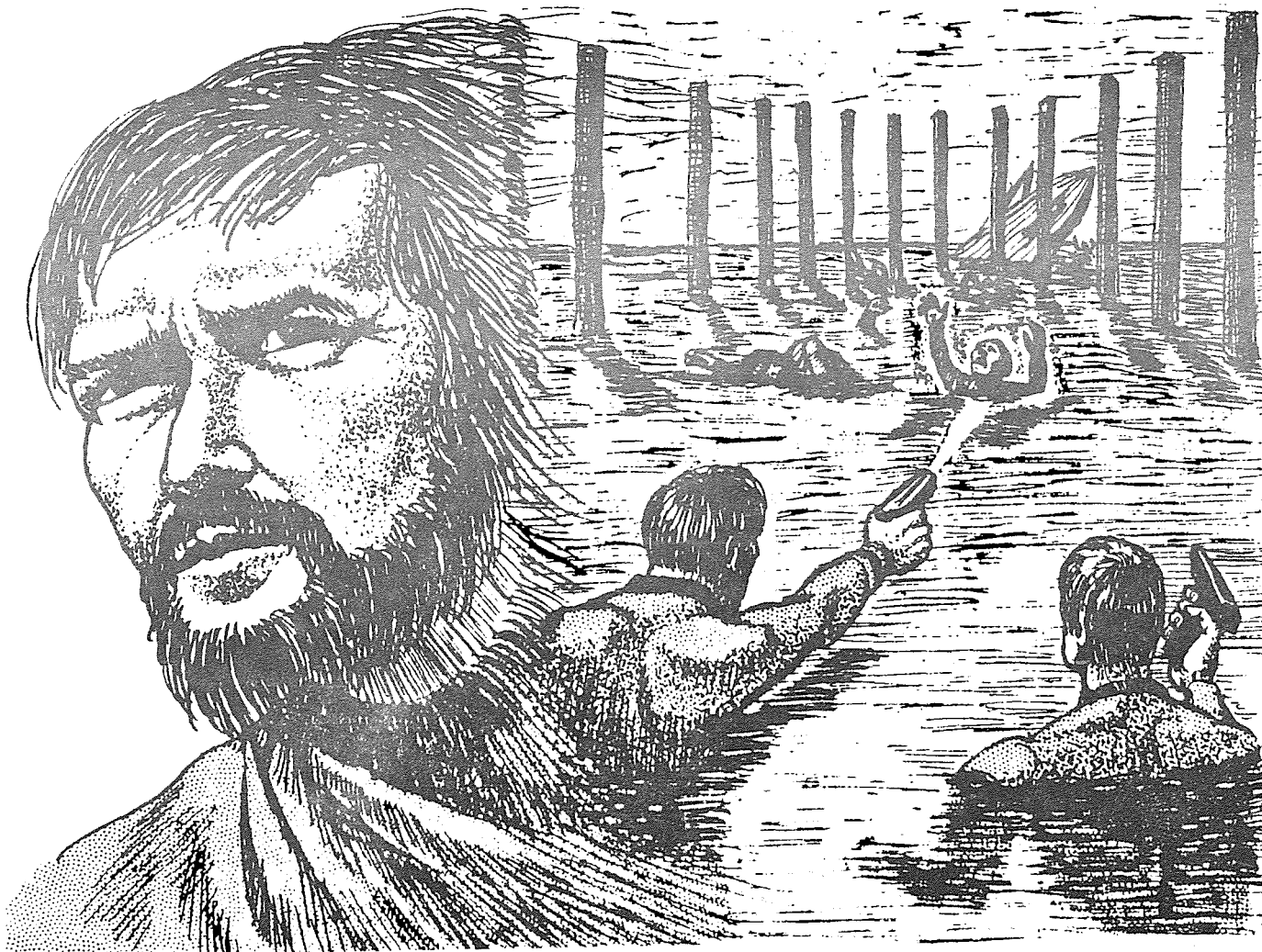
"The what?"

"The...fencin' in the water, meant ta keep boats awa' from the hydraulic turbine. 'Twas made o' heavy posts, so we could mount panels on 'em an' channel the water toward the turbine if 'twas needed. They broke doon twa o' the posts, smashin' oop their boat thereby, an' for a' thot we yelled at 'em ta swim aroon' ta the edge o' the weir, they went wi' the current straight toward the turbine...." Scott finished his drink in a quick gulp. "They couldna help but see it, Sir. There was no way we could pass it off as some kinda fish-trap or mill-wheel or anythin' like thot. They would ha' talked. I...had no choice, Sir."

"You mean...you had to kill them?"

"Aye, Sir." Scott studied his glass, a muscle twitching in his jaw. "On the chance thot anyone was watchin' from the shore, we sneaked doon ta behind the posts and shot 'em at close range...the puir bastards thought we were comin' ta help 'em so they stayed together an' didn't scatter or run.... We used phasers set on stun, an' we let the water do the rest. If anyone found the bodies, a' thot they could tell was thot the men had drowned...five men, four women...." He glanced up at Kirk. "'Twas an ugly business, Sir."

"I know, Scotty. Ugly, but necessary." Kirk dropped a hand to Scott's shoulder and squeezed it for a moment. "Command is like that."



"Aye," Scott growled, voice rough with bitterness. "Command is like that."

"But go on with the story. How did this make so many crewmen decide to stay?"

"Weel, that was the beginnin'. A day or so later, a boat-load o' people came oot ta ask us if we'd seen what became o' the fishin' boat. We couldna verra weel avoid talkin' ta them, but we managed ta keep 'em from seein' anythin' suspicious...I think. We told 'em the boat had crashed on oor weir an' gone doon wi' a' hands... showed 'em the broken poles an' some o' the wreckage that'd washed up on oor shore. They believed us, but 'twas plain they didna like it, nor us either. I canna tell wha' oopset 'em exactly, but they left in a bad mood. We guessed there'd be trouble after that, sa we got oorsel's ready for it - went on Yellow Alert, so ta speak."

"And was there trouble?"

"I canna tell, Sir. That was only three days before we got yer message aboot High Harbor."

"But, dammit, why did they prefer to stay???"

"'Tis kinda complicated." Scott rubbed his eyes, which were now noticeably bloodshot. "The Security folk - an' remember, many o' them were former ship's-services personnel - didna want ta abandon the settlement after they'd worked sa hard for it, even killed for it, especially when there was a chance o' an attack. 'Tis as if they'd felt useless before, but had a purpose noo...."

DeSalle shook his head hard, and poured himself another bourbon.

"Besides, there was the fact o' the High Harbor people comin' ta join 'em, add ta their numbers an' gi' the settlement a better chance. Finally..." He gaved Kirk a pained look. "Many didna think there was much hope for yer idea. They thought there were better odds for the settlement survivin' an' becomin' the source o' a new Federation, a new age o' Science...."

"An empire, with themselves as the leaders," Kirk finished for him. "Yes, I can see how that would look more tempting than a wild chance like this - especially with me running it."

"Captain, I didna say that!"

"No, Sir, not...not exactly...." DeSalle chimed in.

"Quit apologizing." Kirk grinned humorlessly. "I'm used to having people blame me for the disaster; it hardly hurts anymore. It's no worse than you could expect, especially from Security types.... That's why you've got to act The Captain all the time, never show any human failings, or they'll turn on you, like dogs on a wounded leader.... Hah! I wonder how they'll get along with the High harbor emigrants!"

He stopped, worried by the turn his thoughts were taking. Scott and DeSalle were looking at him with strained, frightened faces. No, this is no time for resentment, he reminded himself. Back to the subject at hand. "Well, that's neither here nor there. The point is, we've got something that would make a good excuse for our 'paranoia', as the Anarchists would see it. Killing the fishermen to keep the secret.... No, that wouldn't do by itself; Jenneth's people are used to constant skirmishes, raids, a low-level war with their neighbors - they wouldn't see why killing nine people would make us so guilty...." He stepped away from the desk and resumed his pacing. "Remember what we're covering...keep the story as close as possible...excuse slips in the facade.... Hah! I think I've got it!"

He turned back to Scott. "Discipline problems on the ground - that's it. They'll believe it; their whole history follows that pattern! Most people in this time-line turned away from Science for the same reason that they rejected government - because it brought Earth to disaster, remember? All right, so the same thing happened - in reverse - at the settlement." He leaned against the desk and grinned triumphantly down at the two anxious officers. "Here's the story: after the disaster, when you'd left the ship and settled on Earth, every-

body was so dismayed by their loss that they decided to make a radical change. They gave up Anarchism and took up military organization, with Scott as the supreme leader. Do you see it? You were surrounded by hostile neighbors, worried about the Klingons and Romulans coming, and that looked like the best way to defend yourselves and spread Science. It seemed to work well, and you got use to it, and everything was going fine until that business with the fishing-boat and the suspicious neighbors started giving you second thoughts. Contact with the High Harbor people brought the whole question into crisis. Now that there's a way home, you're all guilty as hell about your brief fling with government-making and some of your leftover habits from it. See? That covers all the bases, I think."

"Aye...." Scott nodded appreciatively. "It'll cover any future slips, too."

"And - and it'll explain why I - why people get so upset at the idea of the Anarchists reading their minds!" DeSalle enthused. "That's what we don't want them to find out!"

"No, wait...." Kirk frowned. "That'll cover your outbreak, DeSalle, but not Scotty's. There wasn't any question of Quannechota reading his mind. We've got to give them some reason for flaring up at Quanna.... Scotty, why did you fly off the handle at her? What set it off?"

"I...I'm no' sure...." Scott fidgeted with his glass and tried to find some words for what had happened to him. "It was...seein' her take Spock's place like she owned it...realizin' just what it meant that he was gone, and there was no one to fill his place...."

"Yes...." Kirk stepped back and waited until the familiar scar stopped hurting. "That brought it all home. It hurts that he's gone...I know. So, it hurt to see her there, working Spock's computer as if she owned it.... We could say that he DID own it, that it was his 'share' of the ship - so you wanted her to go away. When she wouldn't go, you lost your temper and fell back into the habit of command. You behaved the way you were used to behaving at the settlement. That's your story."

"Aye," Scott agreed, glumly refilling his glass. "It'll do." 'Tis close enough to the truth.

"Well, gentlemen, now that we've got our plot formed, let's go spread it to the rest of our people. They'll have to back up our story if the Anarchists check with them. How can we get the word around to 110 people, quickly, and without letting the Anarchists know?"

"We canna use the intercom; they'll overhear."

"Why can't we just tell it to the department heads?" DeSalle suggested. "They can relay it to everyone else."

"Section chiefs first," Kirk corrected. "Then everyone else we can reach. Divide them up: DeSalle, go to Security first, then start working through the Social Sciences; Scotty, you take Engineering and the Physics section; I'll get Sickbay and the Biology section and the rest of the bridge crew. When you've done, send a recorded message to my cabin...hmm, coded. It's 'safety check complete' if you've finished with no trouble and 'safety check incomplete' if there's any problem. Got that? Fine. Let's move."

"Aye, Sir." DeSalle got up and hurried out the door, grateful to quit all this nerve-wracking brain-work for a simple messenger assignment.

Scott stayed where he was, giving Kirk a calculating look. Kirk saw it, relocked the door, and turned back to him. "What's on your mind now, Scotty?"

"Uh, Captain, if ye dinna mind me askin', hoo d'ye plan ta handle that Indian woman when ye get back ta her?"

"That Indian woman' is my wife, Mr. Scott."

"Aye, Sir." Scott said everything else with an unblinking stare.

"So that's it," Kirk answered slowly. He set his fists on the desk and leaned over the Engineer. "You think I'll tell her everything, don't you? You think I'm so besotted with her that I'd let the mission go down the drain, lose the whole universe, if she asked it? Do you really think I'd give up the universe for her? I wouldn't do that for Edith...." Edith Keeler.... Oh God, this choice again? He turned his face away.

"I'm no' sayin' thot ye'd tell her aught on purpose," Scott soothed, "but she is clever an' love might make ye careless o' tongue."

"'Loose lips sink ships,'" Kirk quoted from between gritted teeth. "Do you think I don't know that?"

"Certainly ye do, in normal times," Scott answered carefully. "But there's naethin' remotely normal aboot this. Jim, look at yerself. These past eight months ye've been through a meat-grinder - aye, an' I admit thot much of it was oor doin' - but it was the Anarchists wha took ye in an' helped ye, an' in return ye're lettin' some o' their ways rub off on ye. 'Twould be odd if ye hadn't. So they've become yer friends, yer allies, an' noo yer relatives. Betimes ye seem closer ta them than ta us." He shrugged expressively. "'Tis somethin' ta be thought on."

"Mister Scott," Kirk shaped each word as if he were hewing it out of granite. "You may question my judgment, but not my loyalty. Do you understand? Nothing that's happened here changes the fact that I'm a Starship Captain, first and last...." He stopped short, realizing the implications of what he'd just said.

"Aye, Sir." Scott's face didn't change, but he felt as if he were sinking into quicksand. So that's his price! was all he could think. That's what he wants, and begod, he's taking it! "Aye...accepted!"

A minute later they were out of Scott's cabin and heading in two different directions. As he half-trotted down the corridor Kirk reconsidered his destination; it would be quicker to hunt up the bridge crew first, particularly Uhura. If anyone could get a covert message to the crew, quickly and secretly, she could. He stopped by her cabin door, noted gratefully that the light was on, and pressed the buzzer.

It took a long time for the door to open, and Kirk thought he heard angry muttering. Perhaps he'd caught her in the shower. As the door opened, his first glance seemed to confirm his guess. The lighting was very dim and Uhura was wearing nothing but a hastily clutched loose robe, a completely disheveled hairdo, and a sour look. She stared blankly at him for a moment, suddenly widened her eyes in astonishment, stepped back from the door and vaguely waved him in. He entered, wondering why she was looking at him like that.

"'Penda, is something wrong? Who is it?" came a familiar masculine voice from behind the dividing screen. Uhura half-turned toward the voice, stopped to glance back at Kirk, and paused for an indecisive second. The man in the sleeping area, apparently worried, dialed up the lights and leaned out from behind the screen to see what was happening. Kirk got a good long look at him. It was Sulu.

...I guess I should have expected that.... Kirk thought, idly noting how the helmsman stared at him, did a double-take, and blushed all the way down to his navel. Uhura glanced from one man to the other, looked Kirk in the eye, and gracefully shrugged. Kirk sighed and looked away, dragging his attention back to his purpose in coming here. Sulu ducked back behind the screen and began rummaging around for his clothes. Uhura moved toward her desk and offered Kirk a seat.

"Uhura, we have a political crisis on our hands, and I'll need your help," Kirk began, settling into a chair. "Scotty made a serious slip in front of the Anarchists, and now we've got to cover for it." As concisely as he could, Kirk outlined the Anarchists' suspicions and the crew's counter-story and the need to spread the alibi around the crew as fast as possible. Halfway through the recital Sulu came out of the sleeping area, wearing every stitch of his rumpled uniform and looking studiously normal. Kirk politely ignored him.

"No problem, Captain," Uhura said. "We still have five people in Communications; I'll contact them myself and send them after the off-duty personnel. I'll also contact the remainder of the ship's-services crew. Sulu can get the Navigation people and the phaser crews."

"And the Biology staff and Sickbay," Sulu added. "That leaves Chekov for you, and whoever else is on the bridge right now."

"Don't waste time on Sickbay and Biology. I'll get them."

"We can do that, Captain," Uhura cut in. "It would rouse less suspicion if we did the running around instead of you. All the Anarchists know you on sight."

"So much the better. They won't wonder about me walking around the ship, acting like a...an assistant Coordinator."

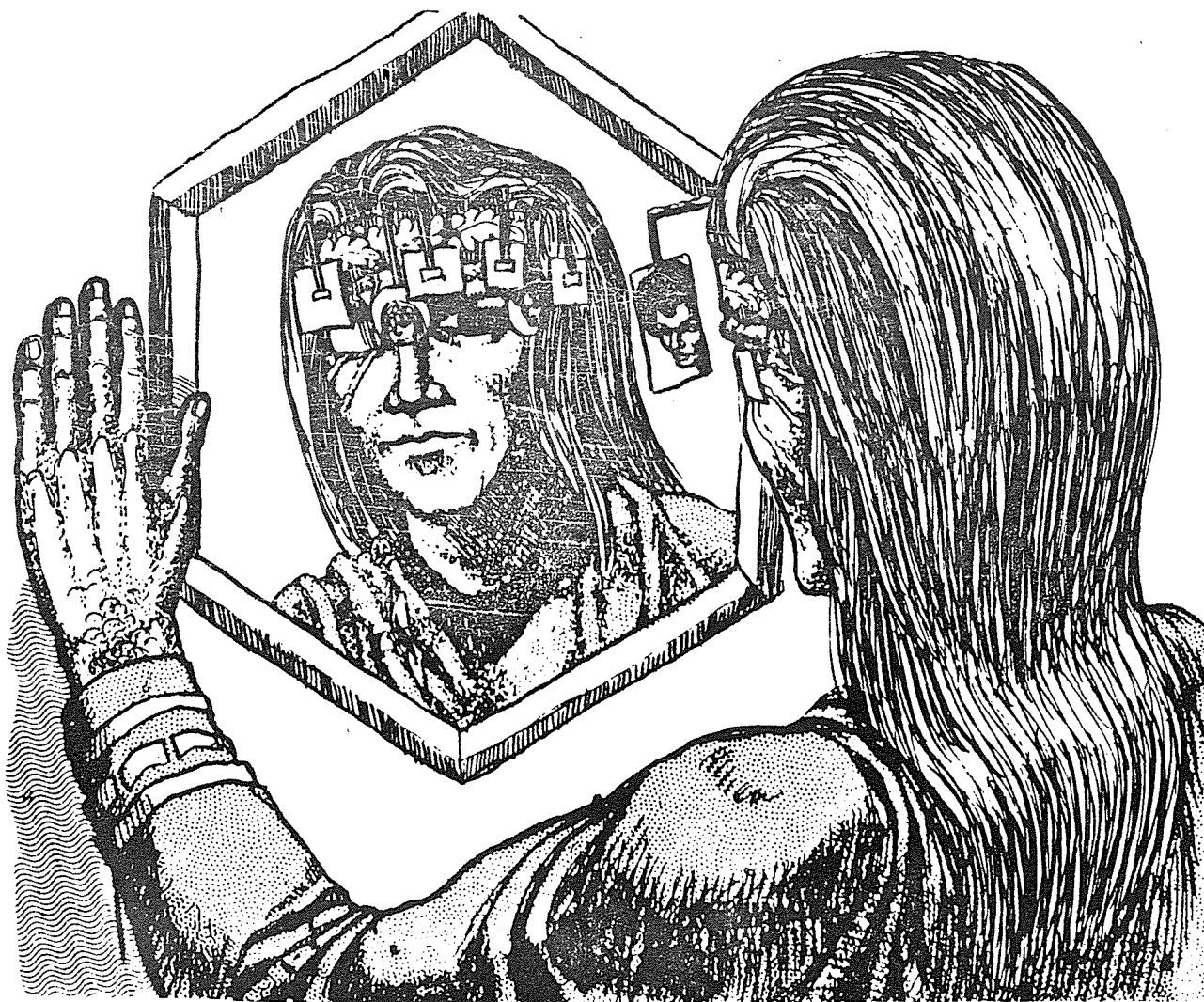
"Captain," Uhura pronounced firmly, "it would be best if we did it."

"Why?" Kirk demanded, growing irritable. "Why not me?"

Sulu and Uhura looked at each other, then back at him. "Captain?" Sulu reluctantly broke the silence. "Have you seen yourself in a mirror lately?"

"Huh?" Come to think of it, no, I haven't. Worried, Kirk got up and went to Uhura's wall-cabinet, pulled back the door and looked into the mirror.

What he saw was a complete stranger. There stood a tall gaunt man in a loose gold shirt, his long gray-streaked hair held back by a gaudy tooled-leather band, half of his sharp-boned face a crooked map of scars, one eye covered by a patch and half-obsured by the bright armature of the hanging mirrors, the other eye sunk deep in shadows and surrounded by the silver-glittering Crown.... That isn't me! That's one of the Anarchists



wearing my shirt. Where did Jim Kirk go? My God, Jenneth looks more like me than I do! He stepped back and closed the cabinet, and turned dazedly toward Sulu and Uhura.

"Do you see what we mean, Captain?" Uhura explained gently. "The bridge crew and the senior officers see you every day. Anyone else would have trouble recognizing you."

"All right," Kirk surrendered. "All right. You do it. You do it all. I'll be...in my cabin." He paced out of the room like a sleepwalker, leaving Sulu and Uhura exchanging glances behind him.

Quannechota was waiting in his cabin. As Kirk came in she sat up and leaned forward as if to speak to him, but he caught her in his arms and stopped her with a kiss. "No," he whispered pulling away just enough to unfasten the seal of his shirt. "Don't say a word. Not one word. Let's just go to bed." She smiled and shrugged and reached for his belt, and he tugged at her clothes, clumsily and frantically, in desperate need of the primitive, solid comfort of flesh on flesh. He sobbed once as her lips brushed over his missing eye, and caught her up in his arms as if he would never let her go, but he didn't say a word to her - carefully, not one word.

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Project Tape R-142, Roantree recording.

BAD DAY. BAD OMEN FOR THE MEETING TONIGHT. EVERYBODY ON THE BRIDGE ACTED TENSE AND SUBDUED, SCOTTY SEEMED DOWNRIGHT AFRAID OF ME AND PRACTICALLY TERRIFIED OF QUANNA. I ASSUME HE'S HORRIBLY ASHAMED OF HIS OUTBURST AT HER LAST NIGHT, BUT THIS REACTION GOT IN THE WAY OF HIS WORK. HE KEPT GETTIN UP AND PACING AROUND THE BRIDGE, INSPECTING EVERY STATION EXCEPT QUANNA'S, MAKING EVERYBODY NERVOUS. I TRIED HUMMING A FEW SLOW CALMING TUNES TO SMOOTH THINGS DOWN, AND IT WORKED FOR AWHILE, THOUGH NOT LONG ENOUGH.

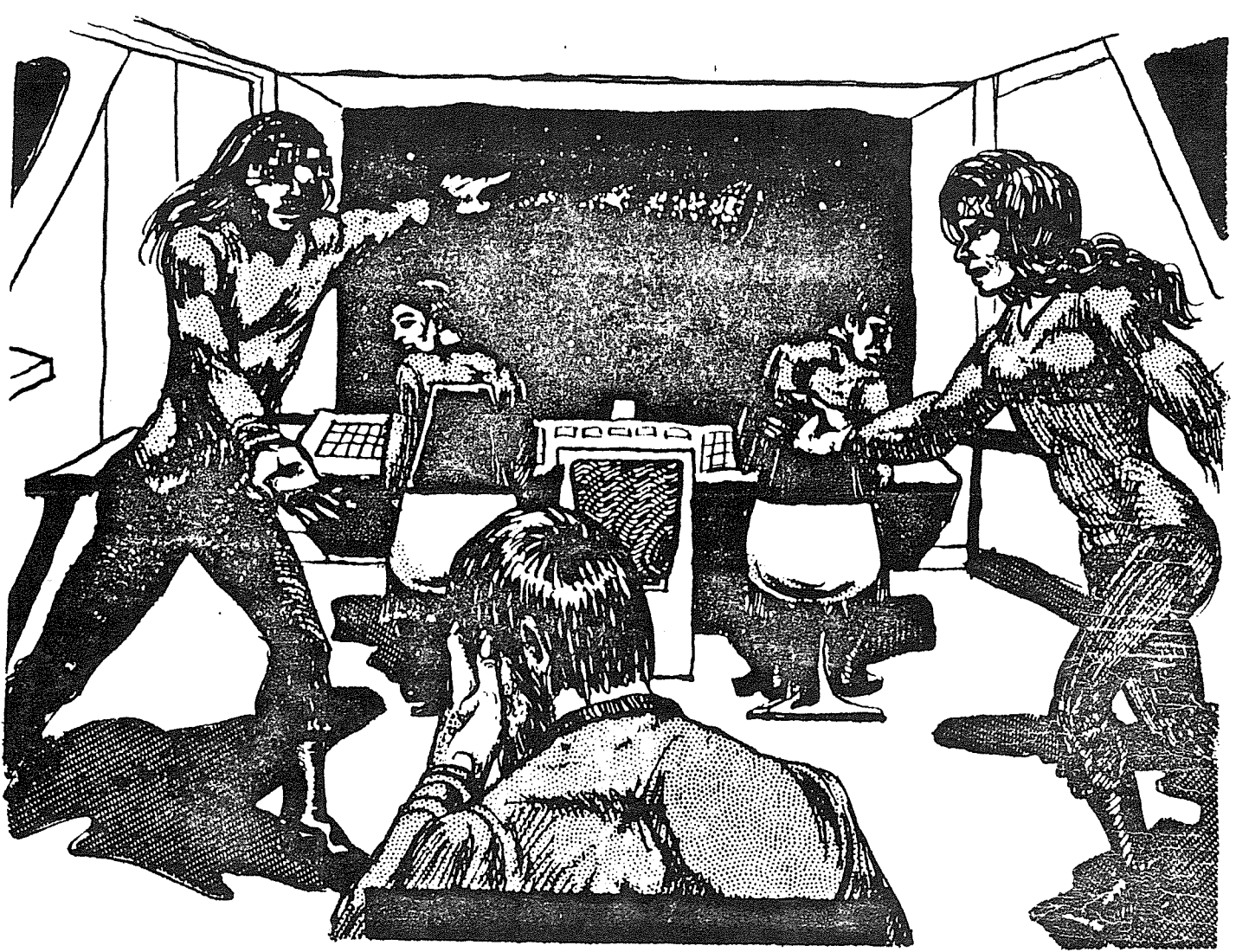
CURIOUS: THE RED-AND-BLACK LADY CAUGHT ON AND HUMMED ALONG WITH ME, WHICH HELPED CONSIDERABLY. WITH HER COMMUNICATIONS SKILLS, I THINK SHE'D MAKE A GOOD COORDINATOR. HER PERSONAL FOIBLES DON'T SEEM TO BOTHER THE CREW ANY - I STILL DON'T KNOW WHY SHE DOESN'T WEAR ANY PANTS WITH THAT SHIRT, BUT HER PEOPLE SEEM USED TO IT.... SHE HAS A LOVELY VOICE, ANYWAY. WE DID FINE UNTIL I STARTED HUMMING "LONESOME VALLEY;" APPARENTLY THAT'S SOME SPECIAL SONG OF SCOTTY'S, BECAUSE AS SOON AS HE RECOGNIZED THE TUNE HE ASKED ME TO PLEASE SHUT UP.

THE MOOD EASED UP AGAIN WHEN KIRK CAME ONTO THE BRIDGE. SCOTTY DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING, BUT HE WAS SO PITIFULLY GRATEFUL TO SEE HIM THAT YOU COULD FEEL IT. KIRK CERTAINLY FELT IT TOO, BECAUSE HE DIDN'T GO BACK DOWN TO ENGINEERING, BUT SETTLED INTO THE ENGINEER'S STATION ON THE BRIDGE AND STAYED THERE FOR THE REST OF THE SHIFT. I DON'T KNOW WHAT HE DID WITH SCOTTY LAST NIGHT, BUT IT SEEMS TO HAVE HELPED A LOT.

UNFORTUNATELY, THINGS DIDN'T STAY CALM. SOMETHING SHOWED UP ON THE SENSORS AND QUANNA PICKED UP ON IT. WHEN WE SAW IT ON THE SCREEN I WAS VERY HAPPY THAT IT WAS FAR AWAY: UGLIEST THING I EVER SAW, AND THE BIGGEST. IT WAS A HUGE ROUGH TUBE, A FEATURELESS CYLINDRICAL THING WITH A DARK PITTED HULL AND A BIG OPEN MAW THAT SPAT BEAMS OF POWER. IN FACT, WHEN WE SAW IT, IT WAS USING THOSE BEAMS TO CUT UP AN ASTEROID AND.... WELL, EAT IT. BRRR.

JIM GROANED WHEN HE SAW IT, AND SO DID SCOTTY: OBVIOUSLY THEY'D MET IT BEFORE. I ASKED THEM WHAT IT WAS, HOW TO KILL IT, AND WHETHER OR NOT IT WOULD BOTHER US. JIM WAS ANSWERING ME WHEN QUANNA REPORTED THAT SHE'D DEDUCED ITS PAST COURSE AND PROBABLY FUTURE ONE, AND PUT A DIAGRAM OF IT ON ONE OF THE SMALL SCREENS. JIM STUDIED THE THING'S COURSE FOR A MINUTE, THEN SUDDENLY TURNED PALE AND YELLED: "SCOTTY, THAT THING'S ON A COURSE FOR VULCAN!"

THAT UPSET THE HELL OUT OF SCOTTY. HE AND JIM ARGUED BACK AND FORTH ABOUT HOW TO DIVERT IT WITHOUT GETTING CAUGHT, HOW TO FEED IT AN ANTIMATTER BOMB, HOW MUCH OF THE SHIP'S POWER THAT WOULD TAKE, AND SO ON. THEY WERE REALLY SERIOUS ABOUT DIVERTING THE SHIP TO GO AFTER THE THING! I BROKE IN ON THE CONVERSATION TO REMIND THEM THAT WE WEREN'T HERE TO CHASE DRAGONS, AND THE BEST WE COULD DO WITH THAT THING WAS AVOID IT. JIM GAVE ME AN AGONIZED LOOK AND SAID: "BUT VULCAN.... SPOCK WOULD BE THERE."



I WAS ABOUT TO TELL HIM BLUNTLY THAT NO ONE PERSON, EVEN ONE'S LONG-LOST LOVER, WAS WORTH A WHOLE UNIVERSE BUT QUANNA CUT IN WITH THE FACT THAT AT ITS PRESENT SPEED THE THING WOULDN'T REACH VULCAN FOR 18.67 YEARS, AND WE WILL HAVE SET TIME RIGHT LONG BEFORE THEN. JIM AND SCOTTY DIDN'T SAY ANYTHING, BUT I COULD TELL THAT THEY WERE STILL TORN, SO I SUGGESTED THAT THE ROMULANS WOULD PROBABLY DEAL WITH THE MONSTER LONG BEFORE IT GOT TO VULCAN. QUANNA ADDED AN IDEA FOR SETTING A BUOY ON THE THING THAT WOULD BROADCAST WARNINGS AND INSTRUCTIONS ON HOW TO KILL IT - IN ROMULAN. SCOTTY DIDN'T TAKE HER UP ON THE IDEA - JUST SAID THERE WAS TOO MUCH RISK, AND CONCENTRATED ON DETOURING THE SHIP SAFELY AROUND THE MONSTER - BUT I STILL THINK WE SHOULD HAVE DONE IT. JIM RESTED HIS FACE IN HIS HANDS FOR AWHILE, THEN GOT UP AND WENT BACK TO ENGINEERING. EVERYBODY WAS DEPRESSED AND QUIET AFTER THAT, AND I DECIDED NOT TO RISK ANY MORE SONGS. FOR ONCE I WAS GLAD TO GET OUT OF THERE WHEN THE SHIFT ENDED.

WE'LL GET ON TO DINNER SOON, AND THE GENERAL MEETING WILL BE HELD DIRECTLY AFTERWARDS. I'LL SEND SPARKS TO GET KIRK FOR IT. HOPE HE'S IN GOOD SHAPE; THAT NAGGING COLD IS TAKING A LOT OF HIS ENERGY, AND THE MEETING'S LIABLE TO BE A ROUGH ONE.

* * * * *

"Yes, I'll come," Kirk promised, looking straight into Sparks' wooly-browed eyes, "and I'm bringing Scotty with me."

"You sure, Big Jim?" Sparks asked, almost in his ear. "It's his condition that we're worried about. He might have another fit if he challenged him straight out."

"He can take it," Kirk snapped. "I know him. Bring on your lions."

"Take it easy, man; we'll be as gentle as possible. But we've gotta know how far gone he is, and what's wrong with the crew, and what we should do about it. If Scotty's too sick to work he's gonna have to give up the job and stay in Sickbay, and we don't know how he'll take to being told that."

He'd hit the ceiling. "Don't worry about that; I'll deal with him. But...if you do decide that he can't handle the job, what'll you do about it? Who'll take his place?"

"I dunno," Sparks shrugged. "Jenneth, I guess. Or maybe you. We haven't worked that out yet. Hope we won't have to. Well, see you there. Half an hour now, don't forget." He gave Kirk a brotherly hug, got up and moved away.

Kirk hunched down in his chair and finished the last of his coffee, trying not to worry in advance about the meeting, and slightly unsettled by Sparks' parting bear-hug. He knew by now that it was just the shaggy radioman's way of being friendly, but it always made him feel winded and a little nervous. Sparks was remarkably strong, and he always gave Kirk the impression that one day he'd absent-mindedly squeeze too hard and break something. Then too, there was always the memory of how those big arms and hands felt to Jenneth.... Enough. Back to business. He got up, took his empty cup and still-full plate over to the dispenser, casually strolled over to where Scott was sitting gloomily alone, and settled down beside him. "Rec-room 2, in about 20 minutes," he said quietly.

"They want me there?" Scott whispered back.

"No, but I talked them into it."

"Hoo bad d'ye think it'll be?"

"I don't know."

"Will it be dangerous for the two of us, alone in there wi' them? Shouldna we notify Security ta stand by?"

"Sulu and Uhura will be listening in; the Anarchists usually meet in rec-room 2, and she's opened a channel in there. She'll call Security if they try to do anything...threatening to us. Otherwise, I'm afraid we're on our own. It has to be that way."

"Aye...." Scott clutched his hands together and squeezed until his knuckles cracked. "The domned savages!" he whispered. "We should phaser everra one of 'em an' throw 'em oot the airlock!"

"How far would we get with it?" Kirk replied, angry at the idea even though he knew it was just an outburst of tension. "They're all trained fighters, you know...always armed, with damned fast reflexes, and they're suspicious of us already."

"I know, I know!"

"Besides, how far would we get without them? We're short on crew, remember? Most of our personnel are from Science teams, not ship's-services; they know less about the ship than the Anarchists do, crazily enough."

"Aye, an' what a crew! Bue shirts an' black shirts! The red an' the gold are few an' far between."

"'Black shirts?'"

"Black's some kinda important color ta them, symbol o' Anarchy, or some such thing.... They learned that regular ship's-issue undershirts are black, an' they've been helpin' themselv's as their own clothes wear out."

"Ah, Scotty," Kirk laughed, "that's a cheap price for skilled labor!" He saw Uhura saunter past, and glanced up in time to see her wink reassuringly at him. "Ten more minutes - then we go. Finish your coffee."

"I wish to Christ it was Scotch."

They watched the wall-chronometer's figures crawl, and in the end left five minutes early.

Roantree, Sparks, Bailey and Quannechota were already there, setting the last of the chairs into a tight circle. Kirk and Scott sat down, and a moment later Quannechota came over and settled next to Kirk. Jean Battre-Le-Diable strolled in, looked, considered a moment, and then sat down one chair away from Scott. Kirk wondered if the Anarchist doctor was supposed to keep a close watch on Scotty, or subdue him if he thought him dangerous. Roantree, 12-string in hand, took a chair beside Quanna. Sparks sat down next to her, Bailey beside Jean Battre-Le-Daible. Kirk began to feel somewhat hemmed in but the growing crowd didn't seem threatening. Then he noticed an unmistakable Science blue shirt in the crowd. Chris Chapel! He gaped at the wearer. What the hell is she doing here?

At length the Anarchists were seated, all 42 of them, most with beer-mugs in their hands. Roantree picked up her instrument and began playing a bright, stately tune. The rest of the crowd quieted and listened, and after a chorus or two she added the words.

Go first in the world, go forth with your fears,
remember a price must be paid.
Be always too soon, be never too fast
at the time when all bets must be laid.
Beware of the darkness, be kind to your children,
remember the lover who waits,
and the house you live in will never fall down
if you pity the stranger who stands at your gates.

"Do they always start their meetin's this way?" Scott whispered under the instrument passage.



"I think so," Kirk answered, just as quietly. "All their songs mean something. Can't understand this one, though."

"'Tis a bizarre way ta start a...a... I think this is a trial."

"Must be some reason for it...."

When you're caught by the gale and you're full under sail,
beware of the dangers below.
And the song that you sing should not be too sad,
and be sure not to sing it too slow.
Be calm in the face of all common disgraces,
and know what they're doing it for.
And the house you live in will never fall down,
if you pity the stranger who stands at your door.

"It's getting clearer. I think she's explaining that this is a...maybe 'examination' is the best word... and she's outlining the situation."

"If true, 'tis domned hard ta follow."

"Maybe that's the idea. People have to stop and listen carefully - above all, think carefully - to understand the song. That's the kind of mood she wants them in: thoughtful, calm, and alert."

"Verra clever, but does it work? I wouldna care ta trust ma life ta such flimsy...."

When you're out on the road and feeling quite lost,
consider the burden of fame;
and they who are wise will not criticize
when other folk fail at the game....

"See? That's a plea for tolerance."

...Beware of strange faces in dark, dingy places,
be careful while bending the law....

"Aye, an' yon's a warnin' not ta be too lenient!"

...and the house you live in will never fall down
if you pity the stranger who stands at your door.

"Well, it ends on an encouraging note."

The Anarchists responded with salutes of raised beer-mugs and appreciative comments. No raucous cheers or whoops, Kirk noted; if Jenneth had wanted an alert, thoughtful mood, she'd effectively gotten one. He watched her lower the 12-string and lift a cup that Sparks handed her - a big clumsy piece of coarse earthenware... and the back of his neck prickled as he remembered where he'd seen that before. The ritual cup? Why? Must mean serious business....

"People we've got a problem to discuss," Roantree began without preamble. "We've been working with the Enterprise people for months now, and we've all been made painfully aware of two things about them: one, they've all been under heavy strain since they got here; two, they're sometimes irrational, tempermental, and hard to get along with."

"I'll say," muttered somebody in the crowd. There was a happy murmur of assent from several other voices. Scott began sweating.

"Now we've small-rapped this for days, and most of the conclusions are that what we have here is a serious epidemic of Le Cafard. Does anyone have another definition of the problem?"

Kirk tensed his shoulders, hoping to every god he'd ever heard of that none of the Anarchists had come up with a closer guess.

There were a few whispered questions, some expressive shrugs, and no other comment. Hearing no opposition, Roantree lifted the cup again and resumed her review. "All right, we have two questions now: how bad is the epidemic, and what should we do about it? On the first question - evidence and analysis, anybody?"

Dozens of hands were raised. Dozens of voices cried: "Me! Me!" Kirk shifted nervously in his chair; he hadn't realized that there had been so many slips. Jean Battre-Le-Diable started hand-waving with the rest, but then paused, looked at Scott and put his hand back down, clearly waiting to tell his story last.

Roantree handed the cup to the nearest outstretched hand and let it go around without comment. Tale after tale unfolded, all briefly and concisely told, of these peculiar people from the other time-line acting strangely: losing their tempers or being afraid without any observable reason, near-strangers coming up to people and insisting that they were former friends or enemies or relatives or their other selves - usually on amazingly skimpy evidence - and making extravagant emotional claims on them, crewmen angrily or fearfully accusing people of reading their minds, alien folk acting oddly formal and cool but displaying signs of hysteria at the innocent mention of common topics - usually biological references, as nearly as anyone could tell - and the women showing an odd tendency to run around in shirts without any pants on. Scotty giggled over that last, a little bit hysterical himself. Kirk just shook his head, amazed at how his crew looked from the Anarchist point of view. Lord, we do seem crazy, don't we, he marvelled. Surprising that they've tolerated my pack of loons this long!

Some of the stories weren't so funny. There was case after ominous case of crewmen acting 'bossy' - telling people to do things, without so much as a would-you-please, much less an explanation: tales of crewfolk demanding that people do things and getting angry when the people asked why, crewfolk acting strangely arrogant toward people, behaving as if people were children or idiots or otherwise deserved nothing better. "Sometimes you'd almost think," Hot-Trot Paula finished darkly, "that they expected us to be...SERVANTS." The other assembled Anarchists looked sympathetically grim. Even Roantree frowned at that.

Kirk grew chillingly aware of the fact that the Anarchists had never, never in all their lives, taken orders from anybody. When it did happen to them, they neither accepted nor understood it. That simple fact made them more alien than any non-Human species he'd ever met. Everyone he knew about understood discipline and regulations, even if they didn't agree with them, knew when to obey laws and follow orders. These people had, literally, no conception of law. How are they going to live? he wondered. When they get to our universe, where and how are they going to survive? And then it occurred to him, very quietly, that they couldn't. He knew of no world, no settlement, no colony, no place in the galaxy that had no government at all. Even the one-man planetoids were subject to Federation law - and outside the Federation what choice was there besides the Romulan or Klingon or lesser-empire worlds? They couldn't survive as they were, not anywhere; they would have to change, submit to Federation law at least, or die. They're helping me get back everything, and in exchange I'm leading them to.... Kirk wrenched his mind away from the icy thought.

"...and for no reason, he jumped on me!" Jean Battre-Le-Diable was speaking. "You saw it, Paula; you were right there. Big Jim pulled him off, and then the Braider came and questioned him, and he turned out to be wrong. He's not my double, and I couldn't have been reading his mind or anything like it, and we told him so. But that didn't stop anything! Last night I went up to the bridge with Quanna to get some information from the main machine-memoire - any fool could have seen that it was important, something I couldn't get from the regular Sickbay terminal, or I wouldn't have gone to the big one, but as soon as he saw me, this DeSalle started picking a fight. He shouted at me to go away, that I wasn't supposed to be there without my teacher... even though he saw me walk in with Quanna, who is senior expert there - and he told me, very rudely and no explanations, to get off his bridge. HIS bridge, s'il vous plait! When I asked him what he'd paid for it, he acted like a thief caught en flagrante and jumped up and attacked me."

"Wait a minute!" Scotty cut in. "I was comin oop the stairwell, an' I distinctly heard ye insultin' the mon. Ye called him some sort o' filthy name. I didna understand it, but 'twas plain thot he did."

"Clarify," said Roantree. "Jean, what did you call him?"

"Un foutre des chiens." Jean shrugged. "So he called me tete-de-merde in exchange. Big deal. He attacked me too, and I hadn't touched him."

"There's no harm in swapping a few insults," Roantree pronounced, "but it's childish to be moved to violence by such silly stuff."

"Silly?!" Scott bristled. He was a great believer in the power of dirty names. "Ye expect a mon ta take insults, an' no' care?"

"Perhaps the name had some special meaning for him," Jean considered. "For all I know, he might truly be a dog-buggeree - and upset that his secret was discovered."

Scott turned an upsetting shade of purple. Kirk put a hand on his arm and squeezed very hard. The Engineer subsided into quiet oaths.

"I think not," said Quannechota, taking the cup. "These people are extraordinarily sensitive to arbitrary words and phrases, and can fall into hysterical fits at the most innocent of comments. For example...." She told, in brief spare words, what had happened on the bridge the night before, after she had stopped the fight between Jean and DeSalle. Scott squirmed at every damning sentence, seeing himself from the outside and unable to deny the image. Any way he looked at it, he had behaved like a tempermental lunatic. Quannechota finished her account by mentioning that Jean Battre-Le-Diable had been awake during the entire scene and had witnessed every word; and Scott wondered if she were careful to always have witnesses about.

Roantree took the cup and held it for a long moment in silence, thinking things over. "These are the incidents," she said at last. "What exactly to they mean? Jean, you were personally involved in the last couple rows, which gives you some personal bias, but you're the nearest thing we have to a psychiatrist right now. Please set aside your own indignations and analyze for us, carefully and clearly, just what you think is wrong with these people." She handed him the cup.

In all fairness, Kirk had to admit that the tempermental little biologist did cool down and think seriously about the problem. He held the cup for some time, turning it idly in his hands, before he answered. "The best summary I can make of their behavior is that it's erratic and paranoid. They all seem quite aware of their irrational tendencies, and get very anxious about displaying them to us. It's...as if they were all afflicted with some vast guilty secret that's gnawing their nerve away, and they're panicky at the thought that we might find out about it."

He paused to gather his thoughts, while Kirk and Scott looked at each other. "Assuming that there IS some real guilt," Jean went on, "why, what could it be? They lost their whole time-line, yes, and they cruelly exiled Big Jim - but those things should, psychologically speaking, have cancelled each other out. For that matter, learning that time could be set right again should have cleared all such debts, wiped out old scores, given everyone a chance for reparation through the mission itself. So why hasn't that happened? Is there something else that they're ashamed of? Something too terrible to discuss? Is it something not yet undone, or even something that might not be undone when time changes? I don't know...." He shrugged and sat down.

"So far, it's all working as planned," Kirk noted, so quietly that Scott had to strain to hear him. "Now we explain to them what our 'sin' was." He sat up straighter and boldly reached out for the cup.

Other hands had been raised, but when the Anarchists saw that Kirk wanted to say something, they put their hands down and turned to look at him. Roantree nodded acknowledgement and passed the cup toward him. A dozen hands passed it on, and it was wet with spilled beer-foam by the time Kirk got it. Holding the cup carefully in both hands, he stood up to be sure that everyone could see who he was, and launched into his story. He recounted Jenneth's questions to him, mentioned that he'd talked to Scott about it - hinting broadly that the

Engineer had been reluctant to explain - and finally arrived at the Tragic Saga of the Ground Settlement and Its Fatal Experiment. Kirk was a good storyteller, and he had some idea of how the Anarchists' minds worked, and he shaped his tale accordingly. Noting that Jenneth was watching intently, he remembered the link between them and did his best to feel pity and outrage at the appropriate places. The only time he faltered was when he caught a glimpse of Christine Chapel giving him a distinctly odd look. He recovered well, though, and by the time he was done there wasn't a sound in the room - except for some muffled noises from Scotty that might have been the sound of blood vessels popping. Kirk handed back the cup and sat down, vaguely surprised to find that his shirt was damp with sweat.

"Ah, mais out," Jean Battre-Le-Diable sighed. "That would explain it. Les pauvres - et quels idiots tragiques!"

I think we've made it! Kirk let go a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. They believe.

"...goddamitall bluidy lunacy," Scott was muttering softly, face hidden in his hands. "...did ma goddamn best, an' I wasna too bad at it, an' ye'd think I was a monster o' tyranny just fer doin' ma duty accordin' ta regulations, but no matter hoo ye slice it, I come oop lookin' like Kahless the Unforgettable ta these savages, an' for God's sake 'twas only nine people died, an' what the hell was I supposed...."

"Citizen Scott," Roantree's voice cracked like a whip, making the Engineer jump all the way to his feet. "Is this story true in all its particulars?"

"Aye," 'Tis." Scott could barely get the words out.

"You were made Boss over the settlement, and you ran it like an Old-Time general?"

"Not exactly...but pretty much. Aye."

"You got into the habit of treating people like servants? Ordering them about? Telling them to do things, and they had to do it without question, without explanations?"

"Aye." Scott hitched his shoulders higher and shuffled from foot to foot. Kirk wondered what Roantree was trying to do.

"Did you enjoy it?"

"What?!" Scott snapped his head up. The look of shock on his face would have been impossible to fake. "No! Never! Ma God, do ye think I wanted that burden, havin' ta be responsible for a' those lives, havin' ta make those decisions for 'em? I hated it! I still hate it! I only did it because 'twas my duty...I thought I had ta.... No! No, I never wanted command!" He turned to Kirk. "I swear I never wanted it! Jim.... Och, ye've got ta believe me.... All I wanted was ta work wi' ma engines, but they told me...." Abruptly he sat down. "Jim, I never wanted ta do it...." He put his face back in his hands and shivered.

Kirk slid an arm across his shoulders and squeezed gently. "Scotty, I know you didn't," he said.

The Anarchists were arguing again, questions flying thick and fast, and the cup sloshed from hand to hand in rapid succession. Quannechota managed to catch it. "Citizen Scott," her level voice pierced the rumble of conversation. "I wish to know what situations are likely to bring about a recurrence of this behavior. Specifically, why did you relapse into the habits of tyranny last night on the bridge?"

"I - I.... 'Tis hard ta remember," Scott gulped. Kirk squeezed his arm warningly, worried that Scotty had been jarred into forgetting his alibi.

"Let me remind you, then; I mentioned that I wished to obtain some information from the main computer, explaining that the agreement barring apprentices did not apply to me since I was not an apprentice. You expressed doubt that I had become the ship's senior expert on computers in so short a time, where upon I explained that this was due partly to my own admittedly surprising talent and partly to a curious lack of expertise

on the part of the ship's staff. I suggested that you call the various Science departments to corroborate my statements. You did so, but then responded with the outburst I have described. Why did that happen?"

"I...lost ma temper," Scott admitted, clutching his hands together. "I wanted ye ta go away an' leave me alone, an' ye wouldna go."

"Why did you wish me to leave?"

"I didna like ta see ye playin' wi' thot computer! 'Twasna yours, an' ye didna belong there. Spock...." Scott shook his head, as if trying to break clear of old memories. "'Twas his, after a'...'twas always Spock at yon station, no one but him. None could take his place...no other like him...no one ta fill the gap...."

Quannechota lifted one raven eyebrow and glanced at Roantree. Roantree nodded back, then took the cup and turned to Scott. "This Spock," she asked gently. "Did you love him?"

Kirk winced. This was the last thing he'd expected, and there was no plan prepared for it. How in hell is he going to answer?!

Scott blinked, confused by the question. "He was ma friend...though never as much as the...as Jim's. Och, he was a genius - knew more about the engines than anyone else, save myself. He knew somethin' aboot everythin' in the galaxy, an' in the Sciences there was none ta compare wi' him. He'd saved the day, an' the ship, an' all o' oor lives sa many times.... Och, if he'd lived he would ha' found a way home wi'in days! We wouldna have had ta leave the ship, go doon there, live through a' this...this...." He fell silent.

"I see," said Roantree. She glanced at Quannechota, then back to Scott, then at Kirk - who refused to meet her eyes. So, she concluded, you did love him. You and Jim were rivals, and Jim won. That explains quite a bit.... She shrugged and passed the cup to Bailey.

The Anarchist mechanic took a long thoughtful drink before she spoke. "I'd like to know more about this revolt," she said. "This split between the red-shirts and the blue-shirts - how bad did it get? Did this one order his team to club the others into obedience? What happened? Details." She gave Scott an icy look.

"I can answer that," said a new voice. Kirk turned and saw Chris Chapel stand up, and he wondered what the hell she was doing. "I was one of the 'blue-shirt' faction," she began. Kirk felt his jaw drop, and hastily rearranged his face. "No, it was nothing like a revolt, and it wasn't put down with guns or threats or violence. All that happened was that a lot of us...well, we grumbled about keeping up such a military arrangement. We wanted to behave more like our neighbors, at least in hopes of getting along with them, since we wanted to spread an acceptance of Science and progress through the world - and we couldn't very well do that if we went about making enemies everywhere. Eventually the grumbling grew widespread enough that the...military faction was upset by it."

"They would be," Ann Bailey growled.

"So Mr. Scott called a general meeting, and we talked it over, and finally...we decided. Mr. Scott announced that anyone who wanted to compromise with the neighbors could leave the settlement...and form an intermediary community. He also warned us that the neighbors might be very hostile to our ideas about Science, and they might burn us as...as witches, or something like that. We thought it over and decided not to try it. A few people left, but not many. They never came back, and we never heard of them again. I hope they survived."

The Anarchists looked at each other and nodded sadly, knowingly.

"'Twasna exactly like thot," Scott whispered, blushing.

"Brilliant!" Kirk whispered back. "Dammit, but that wome 's sharp! Good thing she thought to show up. This'll help get us off the hook."

"Tell me," Christine asked plaintively, "is it very likely that they were burned?"

"No," sighed Roantree, looking down at her scarred and tatoood hands. "Most likely they were shot. Maybe hanged."

"Oh." Christine sat back down.

Ann Bailey shook her head and handed the cup back to Roantree, who emptied it and handed it to Sparks for another refill. "Well, team," she said, holding the brimming cup with care. "Now that we know what's eating these people, we move on to the next question. What do we do about it?"

Instant pandemonium. A chorus of shouts of: "Me! Me! Give it here!" A forest of raised hands. Roantree shrugged expansively and handed the cup around. It sloshed from hand to hand, suggestion to suggestion, some sensible and some totally wild.

"They're all too crazy to trust!" snapped Hot-Trot Paula. "Let's lock them all in Sickbay and run the ship ourselves!"

"Sure," Sparks countered. "42 of us, lock up over 100 of them. Hah! And if 100 of them can't run the ship without our help, how are the 42 of us going to run it without their help? Asshole! I say we just ignore their little crazinesses, humor 'em along, smooth things over and make nice-nice at 'em until either they calm down or we get to where we're going. Once the job's done, they're sure to straighten out."

"They haven't improved so far," countered Jean Battre-Le-Diable. "I think they'll just continue to deteriorate if we go on this way. In time the growing lunacy will make them downright dangerous, and what shall we do then, mes braves? I say we should treat them as the dangerous lunatics they are: be watchful of them, prepare to stop them if they become violent, and do what we can to cure them."

"Cure them?" asked several voices, including Scott's.

"It should not be impossible," Jean insisted, "only difficult. They are sick with guilt over this great crime, yes, but it is only one simple crime - not a whole psychological complex. Single-trauma neuroses can be handled directly and with reasonable speed. N'est-ce pas, Citizen Chapel-Doctor?"

Christine was only momentarily nonplussed at having the cup - and the problem - thrust into her hands, but she recovered well. "It's quite possible," she said carefully. "I think that all you need do is quietly let them know that you've learned their guilty secret, that you're not totally upset about it, and you're willing to forgive them...."

"What?!" snapped Ann Bailey, outraged.

"...ah, you're willing to forgive them if they prove they've learned their lesson and act like good rehabilitated citizens." Kirk thought he saw the ghost of an ironic smile flicker across her face, but he couldn't be sure. "Bear in mind that they'll continue to make little slips, and don't be too outraged by it. Perhaps it would help, in such cases, simply to remind them that you're not their... 'servants,' and they're no longer at the settlement. I think that will be enough - that, and a little patience. They'll straighten out, or at least the situation won't get any worse." She handed back the cup.

"'Forgive and forget,' eh, growled Bailey. "Sounds like old French-church silliness to me. Nothing practical about it."

"Technically, that is also German-church silliness," Quannechota retorted, a faint smile playing at the corners of her mouth. "Mind your own ancestors. But I do not think she is advocating that."

"Ahrr...." Bailey snagged the cup as it passed and stood up, still grim-faced. "Maybe the cure will work, and maybe not," she said, throwing a suspicious glance at Scott. "Don't the old records tell us that Power is the most addictive drug known to Humankind? Once people have tried it, it's damned hard to make them

lose their taste for it. Remember the histories? Remember how long it took for the last habits of gov'ments to die? In the end, people wound up shooting everyone who knew how to make a phaser! How long will that addiction last with these people? How do we know they're not contaminated for life? How do we know they'll change even when we cross back into true-time? You say 'cure them,' you say it's not impossible, but what if it is impossible? What if we can't cure them? We'll be stuck with over 100 Power-contaminated people, forced to depend on them for our lives and our futures, and they could easily trick us into making a Power-contaminated universe, where they could rule like States of old, and everyone else - including us - would be their slaves. I say, don't trust them at all."

"Oh, Christ, a domned purist!" Scott whispered through his teeth.

Quannechota reached for the cup amid the general muttering. "What then would you do?" she asked. "They are 112 to our 42, certainly as well-armed, and already apprehensive of us; we cannot behave as asylum-keepers toward them, nor be assured that we could overcome them by force of arms. Neither can we operate this ship without them. I see no sensible course but to humor them, attempt cure, and continue to work with them." She gave the cup back into the Chief Mechanic's waving hand.

"I can think of something else," Bailey insisted. "We've already agreed to all go through the Guardian; I say that we go through alone, and pick a different time."

"What? When?" shouted a dozen voices. Scott gasped and started to scramble to his feet. Kirk almost had to drag him back to his chair. "Not now, Scotty!" he hissed. "Wait and see how the others react."

"Instead of stopping Ludd's Daughter," Bailey continued, "I say we implement the second plan: go to the first moon colony, just before the Attempted Return, and warn them what to expect. We give them phasers too, and we tell them about the Romulans coming, and we tell them to make a deal with the Luddites. We say: 'make alliance with them, show them that it's not true what they believe about you, show them that you want to bring back Science, but not the State, not governments.' As long as people can trust that they won't lose their liberty to governments and laws and rulers again, they may be willing to accept Science - especially if they understand that the alien conquerors are coming. We tell the moon people that, we make sure they understand and agree, we make sure that they don't have phasers, and there won't be a weapons-imbalance to lure people into Power-addiction, and the Alliance of Worlds will have that much of a head start. We might come back to find the Alliance even bigger and stronger than it would have been without Pennington's deadly gift - and certainly it will be free."

Again there was a seething chaos of shouts and questions and a forest of hands waving for the cup. Scott and Kirk clutched each others' hands and sat very still, crouching under the storm of noise. Bailey, bewildered herself at the reaction to her proposal, hastily gave the cup to Roantree who raised it high - clearly a request for silence - but the noise still didn't abate. Roantree shook her head, set the cup neatly between her feet and pulled her 12-string up into playing position. The sound of heavy strumming cut through the racket as nothing else could, and the shouting began to subside. It sank further as she began to sing with the tune.

The space shuttle ends where the subway begins;
there's a tear on the face of the moon.
From dusk until dawn we have searched all day long,
but there's too many clues in this room!

"What does that mean, noo?" Scott whispered, completely lost.

"Another complex one...." Kirk considered. "They'll have to shut up and calm down and think in order to understand it, and there are plenty of enticing hints to lure them on...Uh-huh. 'Order in the court' and a restatement of the problem. Very neat."

At the best, it is said, we've been locked deep inside
of an old seaman's chest full of charts,
where the maps are contained with what's left of his brain
when his crew threw his balls to the sharks.



Scott winced and gave Kirk a horribly-embarrassed look. Kirk gritted his teeth and wondered which of the two of them the song meant, and just how crazy the Anarchists thought they were.

The power that is stored in this no-man's-land of chance -
 is there someone who knows what they're doing?
 The old soldiers say, in their own crusty way,
 "We've got too many troops in this room."

All around the looking-glass, dancing to a tune,
 sweeping out the house with a fine-tooth comb -
 which, History has shown,
 leads to ruin....

Whatever that meant, it was clear that the Anarchists understood it. The crowd quieted down completely, many of them shuffling their feet in embarrassment. "We're not about to throw out the baby with the bath-water...." an unidentified voice commented, followed by mumblings of assent.

"All right then," said Roantree, lifting the cup, "reconsider the facts. Playing with time is a very chancy game, and we really don't know how it works. There are only two moves that we understand: Ludd's Daughter does or doesn't deliver her gift. Any other moves take big chances with too many unknowns. Bailey, you of all people ought to distrust a mechanism with too many moving parts for its function. Chew on these: we can't be sure of getting the right time for your suggestion, nor can we be sure of tricking Kirk's people so we can get there ahead of them, we can't be sure that they won't just follow and stop us, we don't know that the moon people will trust us and do what we suggest, and we can't guarantee that they still won't be wiped out when they land. For that matter, we have no real reason to think that Kirk's people are lying about the proposed action of stopping Pennington; we got that story from the ship's computer long before any of the crew came back to the ship, remember? There's no reason to believe that the widespread neuroses won't clear up if we follow Chapel's advice."

"I say we go ahead with her idea, and keep Bailey's proposal on the back burner in case something goes very wrong. How does that sound to you?"

She held out the cup, but nobody offered to take it. Kirk held his breath, waiting for some sign of opposition. "Still don't trust 'em," Bailey grumbled, "but we might as well try the easy way first." Nobody had anything else to add.

"Is it settled, then?" Roantree asked.

The only reply was various shrugs and nods. "Ah, hell," Sparks grinned, "let's get on with the party."

That comment brought cheers. The Anarchists got up to refill their beer-mugs and push back the chairs, and the noise climbed to the usual conversational level. It took several minutes for Kirk to realize that it was all over, that they'd won. As Roantree started playing a dance tune, he laughed and hugged Scott with sheer relief.

"Ye mean it's over?" Scott was somewhat dazed by the turn of events. "Yon's a' there is ta it? Can we go noo?"

"It might be a good idea to stay awhile and mingle with the rest of the party, show them there's no hard feelings. Shall I get you a beer?"

"Aye, I could use one. B-but what shall I say if they want ta get sociable wi' me? What should I do?"

"Just be sociable right back," Kirk suggested, getting up and making his way through the crowd. He didn't want to wait until Scotty thought to ask what would have happened if the Anarchists had decided in favor of Bailey's plan. He had hopes of talking to Christine, but she was busy with Jean Battre-Le-Diable and some of the little biologist's co-workers. Kirk went for the beers instead. As he waited in line for the drinks he heard the dance-song end and another one begin - this one sung by a different voice. Two prime singers in the crowd? he wondered, peering to see who owned the voice. He was startled to find that it was Quannechota. He hadn't known that she could sing like that.

Come ride with us young bonny lass, with the angels of the night,
Crack wind clatter, flash rein bite,
on an out-size unicorn.
Rough-shod winging sky-blue flight,
on a cold wind to Valhalla.

And join with us please - Valkyrie maidens cry
above the Cold Wind to Valhalla.

Kirk tried to analyze that one while the odd words and eerie tune sent little ice-shod elves scampering up and down his spine. Sky-ride to Valhalla - Paradise. Yes, drawing attention back to the mission and their hope. Very clever.... He hummed along while the line shortened and eventually let him get his two beers. He threaded his way back in time to see Christine going out of the rec-room door. Well, he could always get her later. He turned back to the mob of dancers and tried to reach Quanna, gave up, and finally went back to where Scott was sitting - talking to Ann Bailey.

As Kirk approached he could see that something was very wrong between those two; they stared at each other with shocked-white faces, ignoring everything else to the extent that Bailey's beer was beginning to spill on Scott's boot, and they spoke in quick and broken phrases.

"Annie Laurie...." Scott was saying, "Haven't seen her in years.... I didna recognize...."

"Me either," clipped Bailey. "Left Monty back on the coast, tinkering with his clocks...I don't even know if he's still alive. Fifteen years, at least.... He didn't have a beard! How should I have known?"

"Scotty, what's going on?" Kirk cut in.



"'Scuse me," muttered Bailey, getting up. She wandered away through the crowd, leaving a trail of spilled beer from her ignored mug.

"Captain...." Scot turned a sick face toward him. "She's ma sister."

"Scotty, Scotty, calm down and look at this rationally," Kirk soothed, settling into the remaining chair. "She can't possibly be your double; she's several years older than you are."

"I didna say my double!" Scott insisted. "She's ma sister Annie Laurie, older'n me. Annie married an' moved awa' long since; I havena seen nor talked ta her, nor even thought o' her in years an' years.... How was I ta know?!"

"Take it easy, Scotty. So she's your sister? It might have been worse. Really, what's so terrible about bumping into your sister in an alternate universe?"

"Can ye no' understand, Jim? The Yule Festival - after 'twas over, when the...orgy started...she came an' took me, an' I...I.... Och, the black shame! An' her more than sixty! Dear God, wi' ma own sister...." He clutched his shoulders and quivered all over.

"You...you didn't know...." Kirk mouthed the words while a glacial chill settled over him. Before his mind's eye rose the stark memory of Jenneth Roantree walking toward him, bright-smiling and splendidly naked, and he remembered what he'd felt for her then. Are we all so drawn to the image of ourselves? he wondered, shaking.

"...the family came from Inverness," Scott went on, more to himself than Kirk. "Years ta make the journey that I made meself in an hour, always driven by the rumor an' hope o' some place where Science wasna forgotten."

Aye the drift was in the blood. But who was it thot finished the journey, came a' the way ta find the last holdoot o' Science? 'Twas her! Her! No' me! I...I'm a clock-maker somewhere on the east coast, an' ma sister - SHE'S the engineer! Lord, Lord, 'tisna fair!"

"Life sometimes isn't fair. Come on, Scotty, let's get out of here. Let's go to the observation deck and look at the stars, or maybe up to the bridge to check our course."

"No! Please, no' the bridge!" Scott groaned. "I'll haveta see it soon enough, but I dinna want ta see it tonight." He got up and plodded toward the door, Kirk a step behind him. "Begod," he muttered, "I'm beginnin' ta think thot yon command-chair is the Seige Perilous, an' whoever sits in it for long in this universe is doomed ta be mangled...."

"Scotty, go to bed. You're drunk."

"Don't I wish."

Scott ambled off toward his cabin. Kirk turned the other way, and almost ran down the corridors toward the observation deck.

* * * * *

Project Tape R-144, Roantree recording.

APPENDUM TO THE TAPE OF THE MEETING: GENERAL MOOD IS CALM, THE PARTY WENT WELL, AND EVERYONE'S SATISFIED WITH THE CHAPEL SUGGESTION. KIRK AND HIS FRIENDS LEFT EARLY, PROBABLY A LITTLE MIFFED AT THE GRILLING WE PUT THEM THROUGH; WE'LL HAVE TO BE ESPECIALLY NICE TO THEM TOMORROW. LIGHT KNOWS, IT COULD HAVE BEEN MUCH WORSE. IF WE'D DECIDED TO TAKE BAILEY'S SUGGESTION IT WOULD HAVE MEANT WAR, THIS VERY NIGHT, BEFORE THE WORD GOT AROUND TO JIM'S PEOPLE. I DIDN'T MENTION THAT AND NEITHER DID QUANNA, THOUGH I THINK JIM GUESSED, BUT IT WOULD HAVE BEEN INEVITABLE. I GUESS THAT WAS MY FINAL REASON FOR ARGUING AS I DID. THERE ARE SO FEW OF US NOW...

BUT DID I DO THE RIGHT THING? WAS BAILEY RIGHT? HAVE I TRUSTED JIM AND HIS PEOPLE TOO MUCH? THE CHOICES ARE SO HEAVEY: GO ALONG WITH A GANG OF GUILT-CRAZED FORMER POWER-ADDICTS IN THE HOPE THAT THEY CAN BE CURED WITH A LITTLE FORGIVENESS AND WON'T RUN THE SHIP WRONG, OR ELSE FACE CIVIL WAR AND SLAUGHTER IN THE HOPE THAT THE SURVIVORS CAN GET THE SHIP TO THE GUARDIAN AND SET TIME RIGHT BY THEMSELVES.... BAD ODDS. NO, I COULDN'T HAVE DONE ANYTHING ELSE. NO CHOICE: WE JUST HAVE TO TRUST JIM, AND HOPE THAT CHAPEL WAS RIGHT.

* * * * *

"Upenda, are you in there?"

"Right. Sulu just left. Come on in, Chris."

Nurse Chapel slipped through the door into Uhura's quarters and sank into the nearest chair, wiping her forehead.

"Whew! Well, we won. Did you hear it all?"

"Every word. You were brilliant, Chris! I think your last little speech turned the tide. Can I get you anything?"

"A glass of whatever you're drinking. I'm shaking like a leaf, and I'm afraid I just can't stand Anarchist-style beer. Ah, thank you.... Eeh! What IS this stuff?"

"Sulu's home-made plum wine. All I have, I'm afraid."

"Sulu? Hmm... But anyway, I can't take all the credit for this. You must have heard Jenneth Roantree's arguments; they swung a lot more weight than mine did. She's still on our side, 'Penda. I think we'd best

start working harder with her, start dropping more hints about opportunities for good 'coordinators' in.... What did we decide to call it? The Starfleet 'Company' or 'Cooperative?'"

"'Cooperative.' That's how all their larger industries were run. But I'm afraid that this is going to be your job, Chris. I don't think she'll trust me very much."

"What? Why not?"

"I'm one of the 'Red-Shirt Faction,' remember?"

"Yes, but there are ways around that. Come on, 'Penda; you know I can't convince her all by myself...." Christine put down her glass and studied Uhura's face. "There's more to it than a shirt, isn't there? I haven't seen how you two interact on the job, but from what I've seen in the off-duty hours, it isn't Roantree who distrusts you - it's the other way around. No, don't bat your big limpid eyes at me; I've seen you going out of your way to avoid her. What's the story, 'Penda? Why do you dislike her?"

"Damn," said Uhura, settling on the other chair. "Some\people are just too perceptive.... Oh, it's nothing she's done, it's just a personality clash."

"I don't see why. She has basically the same personality as the Captain...." Christine let the rest of the sentence drift off in an expressive shrug.

Uhura blushed furiously. "Basically, yes, but from there on up everything's different. Her societal patterns, mores, culture.... Oh hell, Chris, the woman is SUCH a savage! They all are! They're as crude and shameless as - as animals! I admit that I'm used to a more refined and civilized way of life, coming out of a culture that's thousands of years old, and I'd be the first to admit that they're intelligent and brave and dedicated and somehow capable of making their crazy system work... Dammit, let's say it's a personal prejudice, but I just can't abide people who talk and act as if they were brought up in a barracks - or a barn!"

"There's no 'as if' about it, 'Penda," said Christine. "That's exactly how they were brought up, remember? These people spent a lot of their time being farmers and soldiers, men and women both, and somehow they managed to be scientists as well. Let's not lose sight of how hard life was for them."

"I know, I know." Uhura ran her fingers through her hair, mussing her usually faultless hairdo. "I'm trying to keep a proper perspective, but it's difficult. M'Benga has the same problem, and so do a lot of other people. That's one more reason for the recent trouble."

"Thank God nobody brought that up!"

"Agreed. But that's the situation, Chris. I just can't deal directly with Jenneth Roantree. I'm afraid you're going to have to do most of the persuading with her."

"Thanks loads. While I'm busy with that, what will you be doing to further our little scheme?"

"I'll be hunting up every last legal, political, sociological and/or other argument I can find that'll make Starfleet accept her - and at her present rank. Don't think that's going to be easy."

"What do you think the chances are?"

"Frankly, I expect terrific problems. I think the best we can hope is that they'll take her at the rank of Commander. Her original ship was equivalent to Scout class, and those ships are often assigned to full Commanders rather than Captains. Of course, they'll insist that she take a couple years at the Academy. We have a good fighting chance, and I can't say more than that."

"It looks pretty grim," Christine sighed. "Would you say, a thousand-to-one shot for Roantree to make Captain?"

"Closer to a hundred-to-one shot. Really, I'll be the first to admit - my personal feelings aside - that Jenneth has amazing capabilities. Starfleet Command isn't entirely composed of bureaucratic idiots, and the wiser heads there can't help but see the woman's potential, little though they may like the rest of her. They couldn't stand Number One, if you'll recall, but they did give her a ship."

"Yes, and she's one of four lonely examples in all of Starfleet. It's going to be a lot more difficult with Jenneth. 'Penda, weren't you listening closely to what they said in there? Those people are dedicated Anarchists, and to them any form of government - particularly military organization - is the ultimate evil. Once we get back to our own time-line, it won't be long before they discover the truth. How do you think they're going to react? Just how are we going to persuade Jenneth Roantree, a devoted Anarchist, to join a military organization? Have you figured out that one yet?"

"I don't expect it to be easy," Uhura shrugged. "But bear in mind that they're also very adaptable people, and deadly practical, and above all they're Science-worshippers. If the first thing they see of our universe is its scientific progress, I think they'll be a lot more willing to put up with governments when they eventually do learn about them. After all, the only governments they remember are the tyrannies that existed during the Eugenics Wars - and the Federation is nothing, absolutely *nothing* like that! Once the initial shock wears off, their practicality will lead them to accept the facts. As for Jenneth in particular, isn't it obvious that she's fascinated by the ship and wants one like it for herself? It can be done, Chris."

"I'm not so sure. To give up the benefits of a lifetime...."

"Difficult, but possible. Besides, what other choice is there, for her or any of them? Where else can they fit into Federation society? Can you think of any world where they'd be welcome? The only alternative I can think of is that they might prefer to work for a civilian space-line...."

"Of course they'd prefer that!"

"No, not really. Consider: the best ships, the newest innovations, are always owned by Starfleet. It's always been that way, with every navy-equivalent. Heh! That's one of the advantages of a government!"

"The lion's share...."

"Besides, what civilian lines would take them, except for the wretched shoestring-lines out on the Rim worlds? You know how old and awful those trampers are; can you imagine any of the Anarchists - Roantree in particular - working for such after they've seen Starfleet ships? Quite unlikely. They'll change, they'll change as much as they need to, to get what they want. These people are greedy for stars, Chris, and don't ever underestimate the power of good old greed."

Christine shook her head, but didn't say anything.

"Difficult, but not impossible," Uhura repeated. "And if we mean to fight that old prejudice about women in command positions, if the two of us are going to take on Starfleet and drive a big fat wedge into that little crack in the armor, we're going to have to work our tails off to make it happen. Of course we could lose, but what if we win? Think of what it could mean, not just to you and me and thousands of good qualified women waiting for their chance, but to Starfleet too. The fact that I don't like Jenneth doesn't mean that I can't appreciate her talents; the woman's a 1000-karat diamond in the rough, capable of being another Captain Kirk, and how many of that breed can you find? Aside from her technological backwardness and odd cultural quirks - which could be overcome with some decent training - she's the most incredibly qualified piece of command material that I've seen in ages. I mean it, Chris. You've observed her at least as much as I have; couldn't Starfleet use talent like that?"

"True," Christine admitted, fidgeting with her glass.

"And that's what we've got to make them see. All that amazing capability.... Oh, think - just think of all that turned to good use!"



"Umhum," said Christine, thoughtfully eyeing Uhura's red uniform. "What makes you think that it isn't already?"

"Huh? How do you mean?"

"Mmm, never mind. Here's to big changes in Starfleet." She smiled sweetly back at Uhura and drained her glass.

* * * * *

Captain's Log, Stardate 6153.9.

DISASTER AVERTED: THE ANARCHISTS HAVE BEEN CONVINCED THAT THE EXAMPLES OF MILITARY PROCEDURE ACCIDENTALLY REVEALED IN THEIR PRESENCE ARE ONLY RELAPSES TO A TEMPORARY FAILING. I ESPECIALLY COMMEND NURSE CHRISTINE CHAPEL FOR FAST THINKING AND LEVEL-HEADED INVENTIVENESS UNDER UNUSUAL PRESSURE. NO FURTHER THREAT IN THIS AREA IS ANTICIPATED....

...BUT SCOTTY LEFT THE PARTY IN BAD SHAPE. I HOPE HE'LL RECOVER WITHOUT TROUBLE. DAMN THAT WOMAN! ANYWAY, UHURA WILL SPREAD THE WORD TO THE CREW ABOUT HOW TO DEAL WITH THE ANARCHISTS: HAVING A STANDING EXCUSE FOR ANY FUTURE SLIPS SHOULD TAKE A LOT OF THE PRESSURE OFF THE CREW. WITH LUCK WE'LL HAVE NO FURTHER TROUBLE BETWEEN HERE AND THE GUARDIAN.

...AND THANK GOD THAT'S OVER. EVEN JENNETH DIDN'T SUSPECT ANYTHING. IT'S TRUE, THE MENTAL LINK ISN'T TOTAL; INTELLECTUAL CONCENTRATION IN EITHER OF US CAN BLOCK IT. I'M SAFE.

* * * * *

Kirk had just finished the tape when the door opened and Quannechota entered. The first thing she did was come over to Kirk and kiss him. The next thing she did was turn the desk-terminal back on and flip it over to the computer channel. Kirk caught her hands and pulled her into his lap.

"Can't that wait until morning?" he asked, nuzzling her hair.

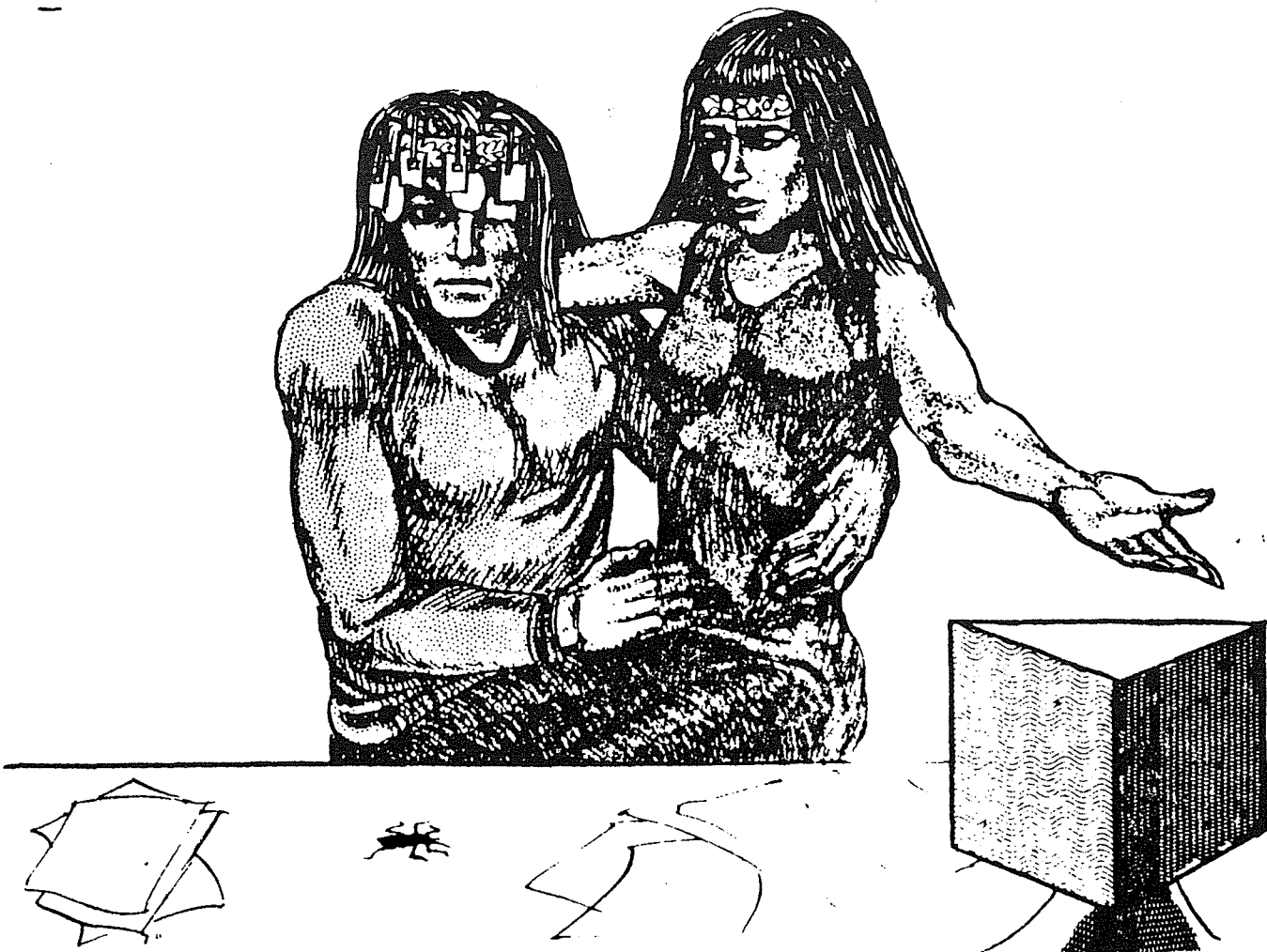
"It can." She smiled in resignation as she freed one hand and turned off the unit. "I am surprised that you are not too fatigued after that hearing. I found it exhausting."

"Mmm. I'm never too tired for love.... Well, hardly ever. You feel good." He squeezed. "Let's call this a victory celebration."

"Oof. Ah, let us not claim victory too soon. There is still much work to be done, and we are not certain that Citizen Chapel's suggested cure will be entirely successful. And there is another problem I must...."

"Not now," Kirk insisted gently, nibbling his way down her long neck. He noticed a cockroach running across his desk and absently swatted it. "Let's leave tomorrow's troubles for tomorrow.... Hey! What did I just do?!" He pushed Quanna aside and stared at the dead insect. "Omigod, that's a cockroach! How did it get in here!!?"

"That is the other problem I mentioned." Quannechota announced sadly. "From somewhere, either with your crew or ours or the Yule-tree, we beamed some roach eggs aboard. The eggs have hatched, and we do not know how many cockroaches now inhabit the ship. I was researching ways to rid us of them last night when Citizen Scott suffered his unfortunate lapse."



"So that's why you and Jean were - Oh shit! Cockroaches! On my ship! Tell Scotty, warn everybody, decontamination procedures...." His words were snapped off by a sudden fit of coughing, a bad one this time, that kept him bent over for several minutes.

"Jim, the symptoms indicate that you have a case of Wheezes." Quannechota peered at him, concerned. "This is harmless in children, but may become debilitating in an adult. Should you not go to Sickbay for an examination?"

"Yes, yes, tomorrow, soon as I can catch Christine," Kirk brushed off her concern. "Cockroaches! Damn! Damn! DAMN! Cockroaches on my nice clean ship! Good God, now it's the ship being nibbled out from under me! No, that's too much. Tomorrow we'll work out a decontamination program. Maybe I should call Scotty right now, warn everybody...."

"That, too, can wait for tomorrow." Quannechota placed a gentle but firm hand on his arm. "For now, let us go to bed. We need rest."

"But...." He coughed again. "Hell, I guess you're right. Bed.... Make sure there're no cockroaches in it."

He got up and led the way to the sleeping area, and began shedding his clothes. Quanna helped remove his boots and sat down to undress herself. Kirk set his Crown-of-Mirrors on the bed-shelf, and then noticed the other crown lying there - the wreath of dried oak leaves and acorns, the Yule-King's crown. He fingered the leaves gently, thinking back to that amazing festival. King of the Anarchists, he thought, smiling. Ironic as hell, especially tonight.... One of the brittle leaves broke off in his fingers. They don't trust any laws or leaders. Maybe right.... I'm leading them like sheep to the slaughter....

He pulled his hand away from the two crowns and turned to watch Quannechota undress. She trusted him too - enough to marry him, care for him, give him back his love for life at the Yule rite.... Rebirth it was, but...rebirth as an Anarchist. I can't be that, gratitude or no. Duty calls. I'm not really one of you.... His fist clenched on the broken leaf, crushing it to fragments. He sighed and brushed the pieces from his hands, and stripped off the last of his clothes.

Quannechota noted as he stretched out beside her that he was still tense and depressed, and she rolled close against him and combed his back with her hands and kissed him extravagantly. In response she felt him smile and wrap his arms around her, very gently, very carefully, as if he were protecting something terribly fragile and precious. She hummed a drowsy tune against his throat, wishing he would make love to her, but knowing he really should sleep.

Kirk laughed softly in the dim twilight, revelling in the feel of her rough-silk hair and her warm breath against his neck and her smooth, firm, springy body. He slipped one hand down to the slight bulge where the child was growing. My child, he warmed himself on the thought. How big is he now? Does he have his little toes and fingers and everything? Will he look very much like me? My looks, her brains...what a fine Starship Captain he'll be! An old sea-chantey tickled his throat. "...Oh, he'll wear a Captain's hat and a jacket all of blue, and he'll stride the quarter-deck the way his daddy used to do...."

Quannechota recognized the song and checked softly. "She may not wish to be Coordinator," she chided gently. "She may prefer to be a Scientist."

"'She?'...uh, yes..." A girl? He'd never thought of it that way. What...how...? I don't know how to raise a girl! He tried to imagine a little girl calling him daddy, running around underfoot, getting into mischief, getting into trouble.... Oh, headache! I'd have to watch over a daughter, keep the young bucks away from her....

The idea was unsettling - especially when he considered that the child's mother would have some distinctly odd ideas about such things.

"Uh, Quanna, tell me; if it's a girl...." He hitched up on one elbow to look at her face. "Ah, how would you...prepare her to be an adult? I mean, when she reaches, uh, puberty, and the boys start becoming inte-

rested in her.... Well, how would you explain to her about the, uh, problems of...uh, sex?"

"In the usual way," Quanna gave him an odd look. "Hmm, perhaps in your universe the male has no part in the ceremony.... Very well, I shall explain. At first menstruation there is a brief celebration, and the mother instructs her daughter in methods of birth control, symptoms and cures and avoidance of diseases, symptoms and processes of pregnancy, methods of abortion, techniques of prenatal care, and so on."

"Uh, no, that isn't exactly what I meant. I mean, well, how would you warn her about...uh, men having, er, immoral intentions toward her?"

"'Immoral...intentions?'" Quanna puzzled that over. "You are referring to rape?"

"Rape?!" Kirk squawked. "No! I mean, yes, that too...uh, I mean...well, all forms of sexual coercion... you know, someone trying to maneuver her into bed before she realizes what is happening.... That sort of thing."

Odd, thought Quannechota. Is sexual coercion such a common danger where he comes from? Perhaps.... One woman to every three men: women might often be troubled with unwanted suitors. "Easily handled. She will be taught self-defense at an early age. To prepare for the worst, I shall warn her that if she should be overwhelmed by force, it would be best to pretend death in order to avoid serious injury."

"Oh. Right." Kirk rubbed his eyes and tried to imagine a girl raised in such a fashion wandering loose among the civilized worlds of the Federation. Terrific. A boy steals a kiss, and she breaks his arm! Or worse.... A boy kisses her, she decides she likes it and she's not at all worried, so she drags him into the nearest closet and.... She'll get a reputation for.... Oh no, not any daughter of mine! "Dammit, it's not that simple! There's a lot you don't understand...." Careful!

"That is self-evident."

"Oh damn. I'm sorry, Quanna. I didn't mean that the way it sounded."

"Then clarify. What did you mean?"

"Well, just that our...courtship customs are different. There's a whole complex code.... But it doesn't matter now. It won't matter for many years yet, so let's not worry about it. Come on, smile for me."

She did, and he kissed her, and one touch led to another. Afterwards she fell asleep with her face nestled against his neck, and he held her close and idly ran his fingers through her long dark hair and wondered how she was going to adjust to Federation society. The cold thought returned, the evening's revelation that the Anarchists couldn't survive as they were. 'Change or die,' he considered. That's the rule of Nature, of evolution.... They'll just have to adapt. Won't be easy. Jenneth.... He imagined how Jenneth would react to a universe of laws and regulations and governments that would block her innocent willfulness, show her that she couldn't just wander about doing as she pleased, make her conform. He felt an instant's glee at the thought of watching that proud neck bend, making her toe the line, breaking her in like a wild colt. He remembered a long-ago schoolbook poem about horse-breaking. 'Some of you must gentle...some will plunge...' How did the rest of it go?

...And some - there are losses in every trade -
will die before they are bitted and made,
will fight like fiends as the rope cuts hard,
and die dumb-mad in the breaking yard.

Kirk clutched Quannechota's sleeping body as if she were a life-line in a stormy sea, suddenly very much afraid about Jenneth. What if she couldn't accept, adapt, bend to the structure? What if she defied to the end? What if the Federation could do nothing with Jenneth except kill her? What will happen to me if she dies?

He lay still for a long time, thinking about that. No clear answer came, except for a dark certainty that the eventual future was going to be very unpleasant. He decided there was no point in thinking about it, and buried his face in Quannechota's sweet black hair. If I survive I'll keep you safe, he promised silently. You at least I can protect... He fixed his thoughts on brave hopes as he drifted toward sleep, but no resolution could shake the shadowy feeling of doom that had settled as quietly as winter into his bones.

* * * * *

Project Tape R-191, Roantree recording.

STATUS SUMMARY: NINE WEEKS OUT, FOUR TO GO, AND I REALLY DO BELIEVE WE'LL MAKE IT. QUANNA'S MAP WAS ACCURATE, AND WE'VE SEEN NO MORE ROMULAN SHIPS. THE PROBLEM WITH JIM'S CREW HAS SETTLED DOWN TO NO MORE THAN OCCASIONAL RELAPSES, TO WHICH WE REPLY - AUTOMATICALLY BY NOW - "I'M NOT YOUR SERVANT." IT'S WORKED WONDERFULLY WELL. JIM'S PEOPLE DON'T ACT AFRAID OF US ANYMORE - A LITTLE PATRONIZING MAYBE, BUT NO WORSE THAN ONE COULD EXPECT FROM PEOPLE CLOSER TO THE SUN THAN WE ARE. JEAN AND DESALLE SETTLED THEIR DIFFERENCES IN A FORMAL FIGHT, IN WHICH DESALLE GOT DECISIVELY TROUNCED, AND THEY MADE UP OVER A BOTTLE OF VERY GOOD WINE. LITTLE JALINA HAS RECOVERED AND TAKEN TO OUR WAYS AS IF TO MAKE UP FOR LOST TIME. I THINK SHE OVERDOES IT A BIT, PARTICULARLY ON DRESS: SOMETIMES YOU CAN HARDLY SEE HER UNDER ALL THE BEADS AND FRINGES AND HEADBAND-FEATHERS. WELL, ONCE A FOP, ALWAYS A FOP. JOHN YELLOWHORSE SAYS HE'S WRITING A BOOK ABOUT US. IF THE AMOUNT OF TAPE HE'S USING IS ANY INDICATION, IT'LL BE LONGER THAN WAR AND PEACE. HOT-TROT PAULA SAYS THAT THE CREWMAN WHO PICKED HER IS NOW CONVINCED THAT SHE'S NOT HIS LONG-LOST SWEETHEART, BUT THAT'S ALL RIGHT TOO, AND THEY'VE MATCHED THEIR WORK-SHIFTS SO THEY CAN GET THEIR TIME OFF TOGETHER. MAYBE THEY'LL TRIPLE WITH JEAN.

NURSE CHAPEL HAS BEEN WORKING CLOSELY WITH US FOR THE LAST SEVERAL WEEKS - NOT JUST ON THE CAFARD-CURE, BUT ON THE COCKROACH PROBLEM - AND I'VE LEARNED A LOT FROM HER ABOUT THIS STARFLEET CO-OP WHERE JIM'S PEOPLE GOT THEIR SHIP. NO DOUBT A SHIP THE SIZE OF THE ENTERPRISE WOULD COST INCREDIBLY - SHE SAYS THAT TRADE-GOODS WEREN'T ENOUGH, THE CREW HAD TO PAY IN LABOR TOO - BUT THEY MUST HAVE SMALLER SHIPS THAT WOULD BE WITHIN OUR REACH. I ADMIT I'M REALLY TAKEN WITH THAT IDEA. IF WE COULD GET A SHIP LIKE JIM'S.... WELL, NOT EXACTLY LIKE THIS ONE - PROBABLY MUCH SMALLER, SOMETHING WE COULD AFFORD AFTER PAYING FOR THE NECESSARY COURSES AT THEIR ACADEMY...THEN AGAIN, WE MIGHT GET THE SCHOOLING FOR FREE - MAYBE EVEN A SHIP, TOO! WE'RE BOUND TO GET SOME REWARD FOR ALL THIS; WHAT RECOMPENSE WILL THEY GIVE US FOR SAVING THEIR WHOLE UNIVERSE? A SHIP, AT LEAST. THAT'S ALL I'LL ASK....

EVERYTHING ELSE HAS IRONED OUT NICELY. SCOTTY'S NO LONGER TEMPERMENTAL, NOT ABOUT ANYTHING. HE'S BECOME SO CALM THAT AT TIMES HE SEEMS DOWNRIGHT APATHETIC, JUST SITS IN THE CHAIR LIKE A CARVED WOODEN FIGUREHEAD. THE ONLY TIME I'VE SEEN HIM ACT LIVELY IS DURING THOSE CLASSES HE'S BEEN HOLDING DOWN IN ENGINEERING. I MUST COMMEND ANN BAILEY ABOUT THAT IDEA; SINCE SHE GOT HIM INTERESTED IN TEACHING OUR FOLK, HE'S BEEN DRINKING A LOT LESS. NO MORE INCIDENTS LIKE THE NIGHT SHE FOUND HIM PASSED OUT IN THE JEFFRIES TUBE. STEADY DOSES OF ENGINE-WORK WERE JUST WHAT HE NEEDED.

THE BIGGEST CHANGE IS IN JIM. HIS OLD SUBDUED MISERY IS GONE - CLEAN GONE. HE ACTS SO CHEERFUL AND KEYED-UP THESE DAYS THAT YOU'D HARDLY RECOGNIZE HIM. QUANNA SAYS SHE HAS NO IDEA WHAT'S CAUSED THIS CHANGE, ALTHOUGH I SUSPECT THAT SHE'S PART OF THE REASON. I NOTICE THAT HIS MOOD HAS GROWN IN PROPORTION TO THE THICKENING OF HER WAIST, AND HE SEEMS UNWILLING TO SPEND A MOMENT OUT OF HER SIGHT. HE PASSES ALL HIS OFF-WORK TIME WITH HER, ACCOMPANIES HER TO EVERY MEETING AND PARTY, DANCES EVERY REEL WITH HER, AND HAS EVEN LEARNED TO SING ALONG WITH HER - ON KEY, YET. IT'S SO PRETTY TO WATCH THEM; YOU'D THINK HE WAS A LOVESTRUCK BOY OF A THIRD HIS AGE, GONE SILLY OVER HIS FIRST GIRL. THEN AGAIN, MAYBE HE'S JUST MAKING UP FOR LOST TIME. PITY THE REST OF HIS HEALTH HASN'T IMPROVED. HIS SPEECH AND COORDINATION ARE PRACTICALLY AS GOOD AS NEW, BUT HE'S STILL THIN AND GETTING THINNER. I THINK HIS PERSISTENT CASE OF WHEEZES IS WEARING DOWN HIS STRENGTH. PERHAPS HE SHOULDN'T BE WORKING SO HARD; HE'S MANAGED TO GET BACK TO A FULL SHIFT, FOUR HOURS IN ENGINEERING AND THE REST UP ON THE BRIDGE - AND SCOTTY IS PLAINLY GLAD TO HAVE HIM THERE - BUT HE ALWAYS LOOKS WORN AND A BIT PALE AT THE END OF THE DAY. QUANNA SAYS IT TAKES HIM A LONG TIME TO GET UP IN THE MORNING, AND HE ISN'T EATING ENOUGH, AND MANY NIGHTS HE DOESN'T MATE WITH HER AT ALL, BUT JUST FALLS ASLEEP IN HER ARMS. I CAN'T TELL WHAT THIS MEANS; THE ONLY FEELINGS I GET OFF HIM ARE EAGERNESS TO FINISH THE MISSION AND AN ODD KIND OF RESTLESSNESS. A STRANGE BLEND. I'VE NEVER BEEN LIKE THAT MYSELF AND CAN'T FATHOM WHAT IT MEANS.

IN ANY CASE, QUANNA'S CLEARLY DOING HIM A LOT OF GOOD. HE SEEMS TO BE MAKING HER HAPPY TOO, SO I CAN'T COMPLAIN. IT'S NOT AS IF I DIDN'T SEE HER EVERY DAY, AND AT LEAST I'VE STILL GOT SPARKS. NO, I CAN'T COMPLAIN.

* * * * *

Uhura was off this particular watch, and Sparks had the communications position. Consequently, the intercom played background music. Sparks listened with one ear, idly conducting an invisible orchestra with one hand, while the intercom sang about being a teacher, not a preacher, and aiming to stay that way. He was demonstrably capable of keeping the main part of his attention on his job, and the music prevented extensive gossiping over the intercom, so nobody complained, not even when Sparks added his rough voice to the song.

I am not a harmful pilgrim;
there's no need to flee and screech.
And don't ever sell for nothing
what I'm trying to sell you cheap.

It wasn't a very good rhyme, Kirk noted, leaning back in his chair at the Engineering console. Still, a good song. Soothing. Makes you forget your troubles.... It had already made him much less upset about the shouting match he'd had that morning with M'Benga, when he'd gone to see Christine for a checkup and some cough medicine and had run into the doctor instead. Damn that punctilious asshole anyway! No way we can run by the book under these conditions...regulations as dead as doornails. My health's good enough. I can stand a full watch. He can't cure a common cold, and I'm needed up here.... He sneaked a glance at Scotty.

The Engineer sat at the con, relaxed and immobile and almost completely expressionless. He hadn't said a word in more than an hour. Save for his open eyes, he might have been asleep. He might very well have been hypnotized by the unchanging view on the main screen. He sat like the dead calm of a cyclone's center, while the active life of the bridge swirled around him.

"...one more time: Helm Systems Status Board, Helm Control Panel, Fire Control Panel, Ship's Sensors Activity Monitors, Sensors Alert Light," Sulu inventoried his board to Roantree, who leaned avidly over his shoulder. "Now the Astrogation Module. You name the parts."

"Housing, Viewplate, Coordinate Grid," Roantree faithfully recited, "Navigation Intercom Panel, Helm Intercom Panel, Chronometer, Ship's Log, Recording Deck. Got 'em all. Now show me again how to use 'em."

"Sure, sure, don't be impatient. Now this button opens the computer, remember? Right. Here's how you pre-plan a course...."

"Excuse me," said Chekov, getting up. "I'll be in the bathroom."

Roantree slipped neatly into the chair as Chekov vacated it. Sulu frowned at her. "Er, do you think that's a good idea, Citizen? You'll be in the way if an emergency comes up."

"There won't be any trouble you can't handle." Roantree smiled, reducing the Helmsman to a silly grin. "Besides, I already know how to work this board if I have to."

"Uh, okay. Where was I? Ah, details of astrogation: right. Here's how to set the display, so you can see what you're doing. I'll set it to standard planning diagram...."

"Bypassing system Y4782-G987 in 1.34 hours," Quannechota commented. "Three worlds and an asteroid belt, no bodies suitable for human life. Some unusual bursts of radiation from the second planet. Sparks, analyze."

"Okay." Sparks complied. "...hm.... It's a Romulan computer-code, giving a sort of solar-weather report. Looks automatic. It's probably some robot station, but we'd need a closer look to make sure."

"Detailed long-range sensor scans," Quannechota agreed. "More power required. Citizen Scott, can we divert more power to my board, or shall I wait until we are close enough for regular-powered scans? ...Citizen Scott?"

"Uh, aye.... D'ye see any ships oot there? If there's naethin' but the one signal, dinna bother."

"Very well." Quanna shrugged. "I will try again in an hour."

Kirk turned to give Scott a long, worried look. The Engineer stared at the screen, apparently not noticing anything - not Chekov politely trying to get Roantree out of his chair, nor Roantree happily playing with the board, nor Sparks singing along with the intercom.

The devil came from Kansas. Where he went to I can't say.
If you really are my brother, then you'd better start to pray
For all those gone before us, and for those about to go.
There's a black cloud hanging overhead - don't tell me,
'cause I know....

There was something else Scotty didn't notice, either.

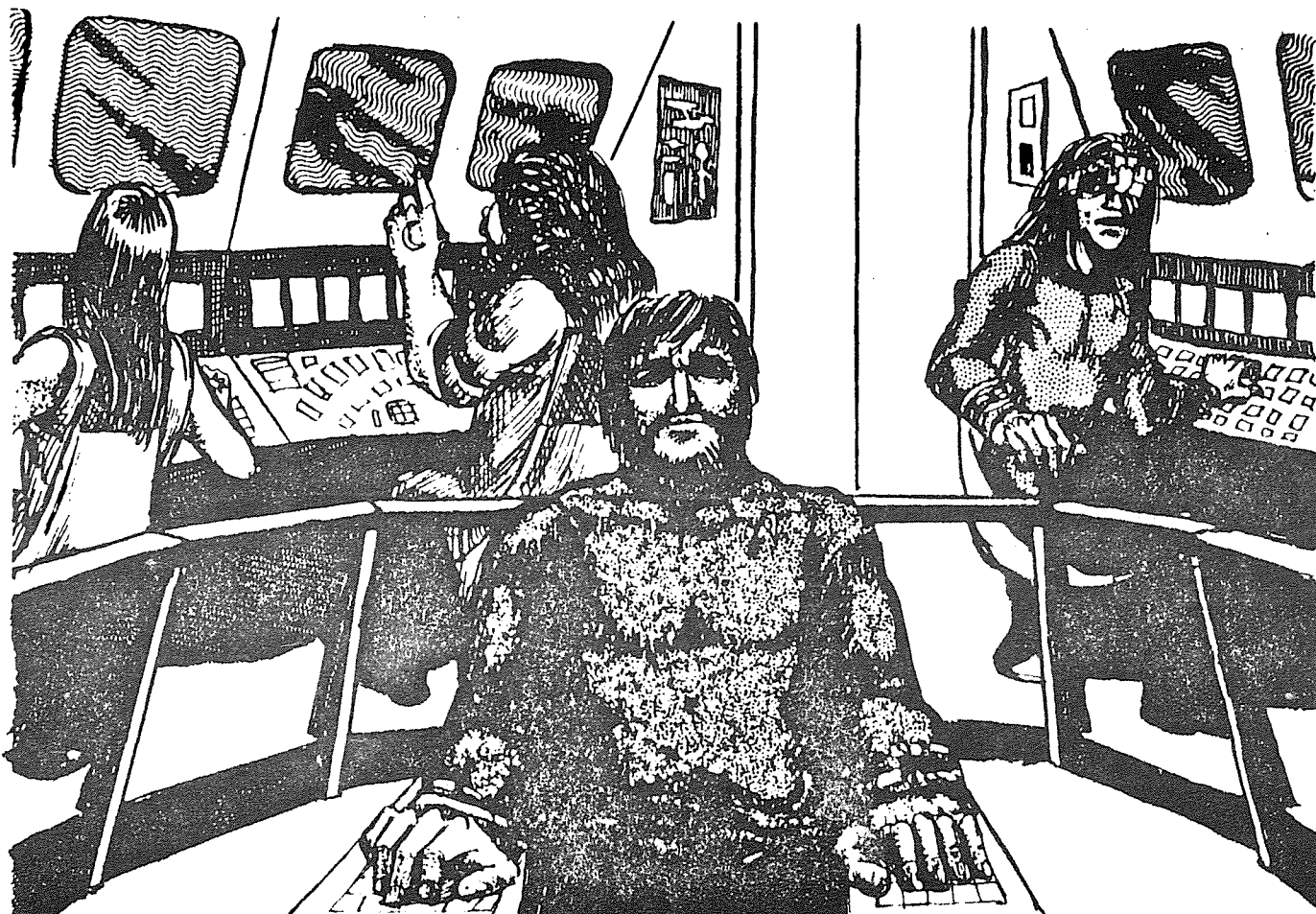
"Scotty, there's a cockroach on your arm!"

"What?!" That woke him up. "A roach.... Where?!"

"Right on the braid. Squash it!"

Instead, Scott shook his arm in a quick spasm of horror. The cockroach, unharmed but upset, scampered up the chair and disappeared into the seam between the arm and the back. Scott jumped out of the chair.

"I find this ominous," said Quannechota. "If there is one roach present there may be more, and these insects have been known to eat the insulation off wiring."



Kirk swore colorfully. "Scotty, snap out of it. We're going to have to take the chair apart. Get some help...." He punched one chair-arm intercom button that should have connected him to Engineering Maintenance. Instead he got a flash of light and a poof of smoke. "Shorted out! They've gotten to the wiring!" He added several choice words that made even Roantree sit up and take notice. Sparks shook his head, got on the intercom, and called to Engineering for "maybe three people to come up here and take the Big Chair apart and get the roaches out of it."

"Roach infestation may be handled in a variety of ways," Quannechota continued. "In this case, the most effective means would be to evacuate the bridge, seal it off, stop all life-support, and evacuate the air very quickly. The combination of sudden freezing and explosive decompression will kill all the adults and most of the eggs. To kill the remaining eggs, we should repeat the process in ten days when they have just hatched but have not had time to mature."

"Ngh! Ngh!" was all Scott could say.

"...repairmen in suits could come in and remove the debris, after which life-support could be restored."

"Och, sure!" Scott yelled, stamping on suspicious spots in the deck-carpet. "Where do we get the air to replace what we lose?"

"From the planetary system ahead. Scans showed the presence of oxygen-nitrogen snow on the second planet, apparently the frozen remains of a once Earth-normal atmosphere. Samples may be gathered for safety analysis within 45 minutes."

"Ngh!"

The turbolift doors whooshed open and the repair crew - two regulars and an Anarchist apprentice - trotted onto the bridge and converged on the chair. In a surprisingly short time they unbolted the housing of the right chair-arm and pulled it off. In the exposed machinery, hundreds of cockroaches scrambled to get away from the sudden light. The repair crew just looked at each other.

"I doubt if we could safely use an effective insecticide spray in such delicate equipment," Quannechota considered. "Could a hand-phaser be adapted for a setting that would destroy insect tissue without damaging the machinery?"

"Aye! Aye! Do it!" Scott howled, dancing on occasional long-distance running roaches. "Phaser 'em! Burn 'em ta ashes! Domned mother-rapin!' - Get thot one!"

"We'll manage, Scotty," Kirk soothed, deciding it was high time to get Scott out of there. "Shouldn't you go get a phaser and adapt it to the proper setting?" He took the harried Engineer by the arm and steered him gently into the turbolift.

Behind him the repair crew removed the rest of the chair housing, revealing more roaches at every layer. Most of the little beasts retreated deeper into the mechanism, but a few of them tried running for the other consoles. Roantree hopped up and began stamping on them. After a minute, Chekov joined her.

"If we can obtain phasers with the proper setting," Quannechota went on, nearly crushing a roach that came close to her boot, "it would be advisable to play them over all the equipment on the bridge. It is not impossible that the infestation has spread to other consoles."

"Captain," one of the repair crew reported, "they've eaten away a lot of the insulation as well as some of the mountings. Besides killing the bugs, we're going to have to make some major repairs."

"How long will it take?" asked Roantree.

"Maybe three, four hours."

"Jim, can we keep cruising safely while the chair's torn down - and while we're debugging the bridge?"

"No!" Kirk snapped, adding some more choice words until he felt better. "Quanna, you said there was a planet an hour away that had frozen air we could use? Okay. Helm, aim for that planet and put us in a parking orbit around it. Sparks, call down to Engineering and find out how long it'll take Scotty to give us three phasers adapted for cockroaches only. Repair crew, detail the replacement parts and tools you'll need, and go get 'em. Chekov, Jenneth, keep stamping; don't let any more of those damned things get near the other consoles. And somebody go get me a drink!"

"Why can't you go get it yourself?" the Anarchist repairman replied. "We're all too busy - and we're not your servants."

"Ngh!"

"You go on, Jim," Roantree offered, catching two roaches with one well-placed stomp. "We'll mind the store 'til you get back. And while you're at it, could you get a beer for me too?"

Kirk bit back a spectacular reply, marched into the turbolift and rode down to the nearest mess-room, kicking the walls in all the way.

An hour later, the Enterprise settled into parking orbit around Y4782-G987-2. The planet was frozen, barren and featureless - uninteresting as a cinder - but Quannechota continued to study it with fine-tuned sensors. Within moments, she found something.

"Fresh burst of coherent radiation, source coordinates A-348.8566 by B-098.7841 on the surface. Sparks, pick it up."

Sparks obliged, flicking on the nearest of the small screens at his console. A face appeared there, reciting: "What ship? What ship? This is Research Station 10-1297. What ship?" Before Sparks could do more than identify the face as Romulan, the speaker stopped, did a classic double-take, and snapped, "Klingon!" The screen abruptly went blank.

"Hey," Sparks yelled in surprise. "He's a Romulan, and he just called me a name and hung up on me!"

"Try to call back," said Roantree. "Get him on the main screen when you do."

"What did you say to...." Kirk tried to cut in.

"Attack!" Quannechota snapped. "Energy-bolt fired from the surface."

"Evade!" Roantree yelled, an instant before Kirk did.

Sulu's fingers scampered on the board. The bridge crew slewed sideways as the gravity-compensators strained to keep up with the ship's ducking and dodging. On the screen, a bolt of light shot past in a narrow miss.

"Source of attack: coordinates A-349.002 by B-099.235," Quannechota reported.

"Sulu, phaser those exact coordinates," Roantree snapped. "Inpoint your target."

"Aye, Sir," Sulu complied, hands moving in a near-blur.

"Wait a minute," Kirk complained. "I didn't...."

Too late. Tight-set phaser beams lanced down, vaporizing an exquisitely tiny area of the barren surface.

"Got it," said Roantree, grinning wolfishly in satisfaction. For a moment there was no other sound on the bridge except the quiet thuds of Kirk beating his fist on his forehead.

"I got him back," Sparks announced. "Channel 17. He's trying to holler for help. Shall I blanket him?"

"Right," said Roantree, "and then put us through. I've got a lot to say to this buzzard."

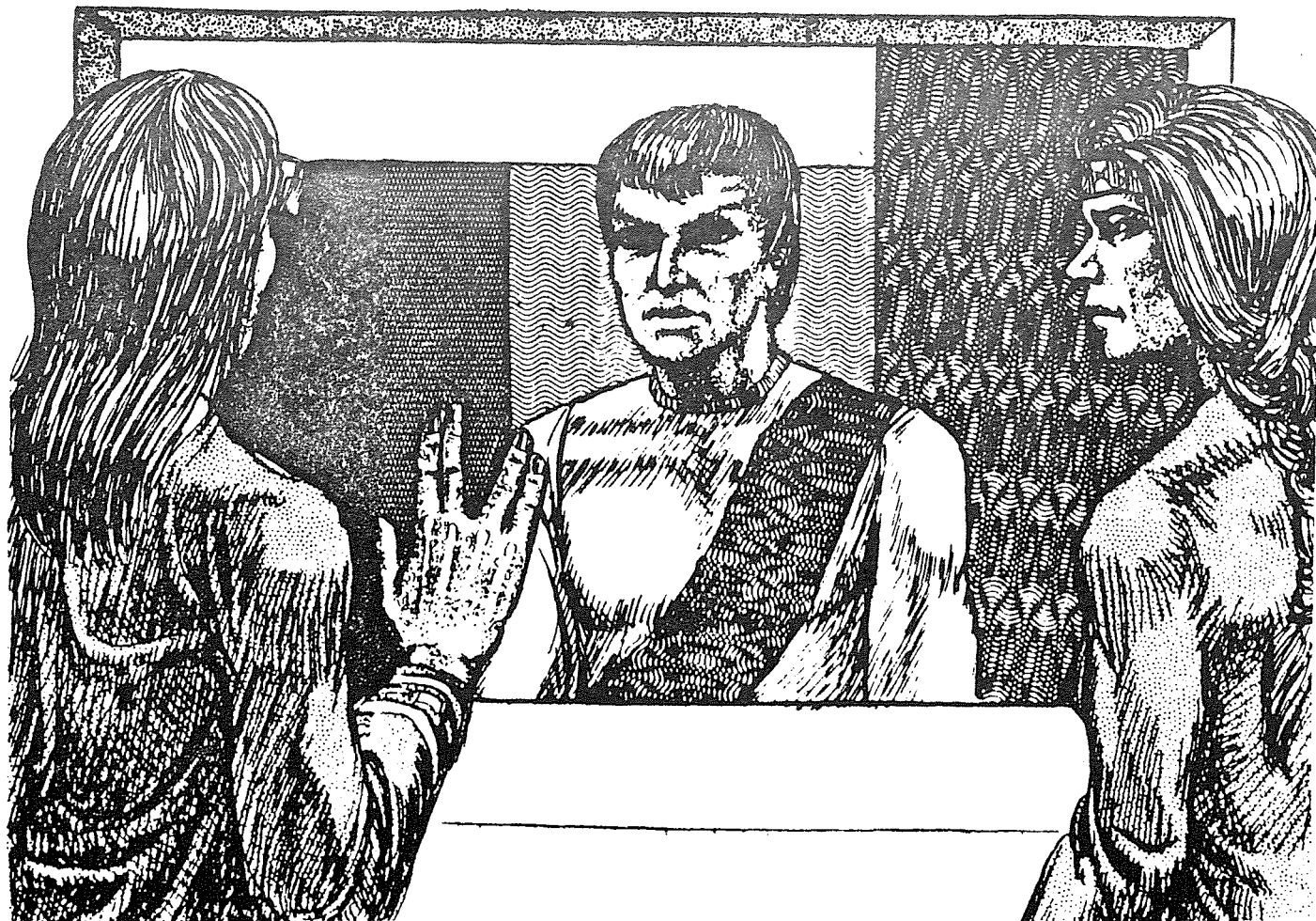
"Jenneth..." Kirk began, then stopped short as he saw the image blossoming on the screen. It was a somewhat harried-looking middle-aged Vulcanoid male in what appeared to be a laboratory coat, his left arm obviously artificial, staring into the viewscreen as if not quite believing what he saw. Kirk suspected that the same expression was plastered on his own face. He's seen that 'Romulan' before.

"You!" Roantree bellowed, stepping forward and pointing an accusing finger at her enemy's nose. "You trigger-happy asshole! What do you mean, shooting at us with no warning or reason? We haven't done anything to you!"

"You," the Vulcanoid retorted, plainly rattled, "have just destroyed the result of 2.85 years' work and research."

"You brought that on yourself, hot-head. You fired on us first. What did you expect us to do? Sit there and fry?"

"Shut up a minute, Jenneth," Kirk intervened, stepping forward. He moved to where the 'Romulan' could see him clearly, then raised his right hand with the fingers spread in the traditional Vulcan salute. "Live long and prosper, Sarek of Vulcan," he said.



Cold Wind To Valhalla

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Project Tape R-192, Roantree recording.

WONDERS NEVER CEASE! JIM KNOWS THE ROMULAN ON THIS OUTPOST FROM HIS OTHER UNIVERSE - APPARENTLY THEY WERE FRIENDS THERE - AND HE'S MANAGED TO TALK HIM INTO LETTING US STAY HERE WHILE WE REPAIR AND FUMIGATE THE BRIDGE. HE ALSO WANGLED AN INVITATION TO BEAM DOWN AND VISIT THE OUTPOST, AND AFTER SOME LIVELY ARGUMENTS HE AGREED TO TAKE QUANNA WITH HIM. SHE'S ARMED TO THE TEETH, ALONG WITH THE USUAL LANDING GEAR, IN CASE THIS CHARACTER HAS A TRAP PLANNED.

I GUESS SCOTTY'S OFFICIALLY IN CHARGE OF THE BRIDGE WHILE JIM AND QUANNA ARE GONE, BUT HE'S SO BUSY DITHERING ABOUT THE ROACHES THAT I GUESS I'M THE ONE ACTUALLY MINDING THE STORE - AND KEEPING A CLOSE EYE ON THE LANDING PARTY.

THERE THEY GO. ROANTREE OUT.

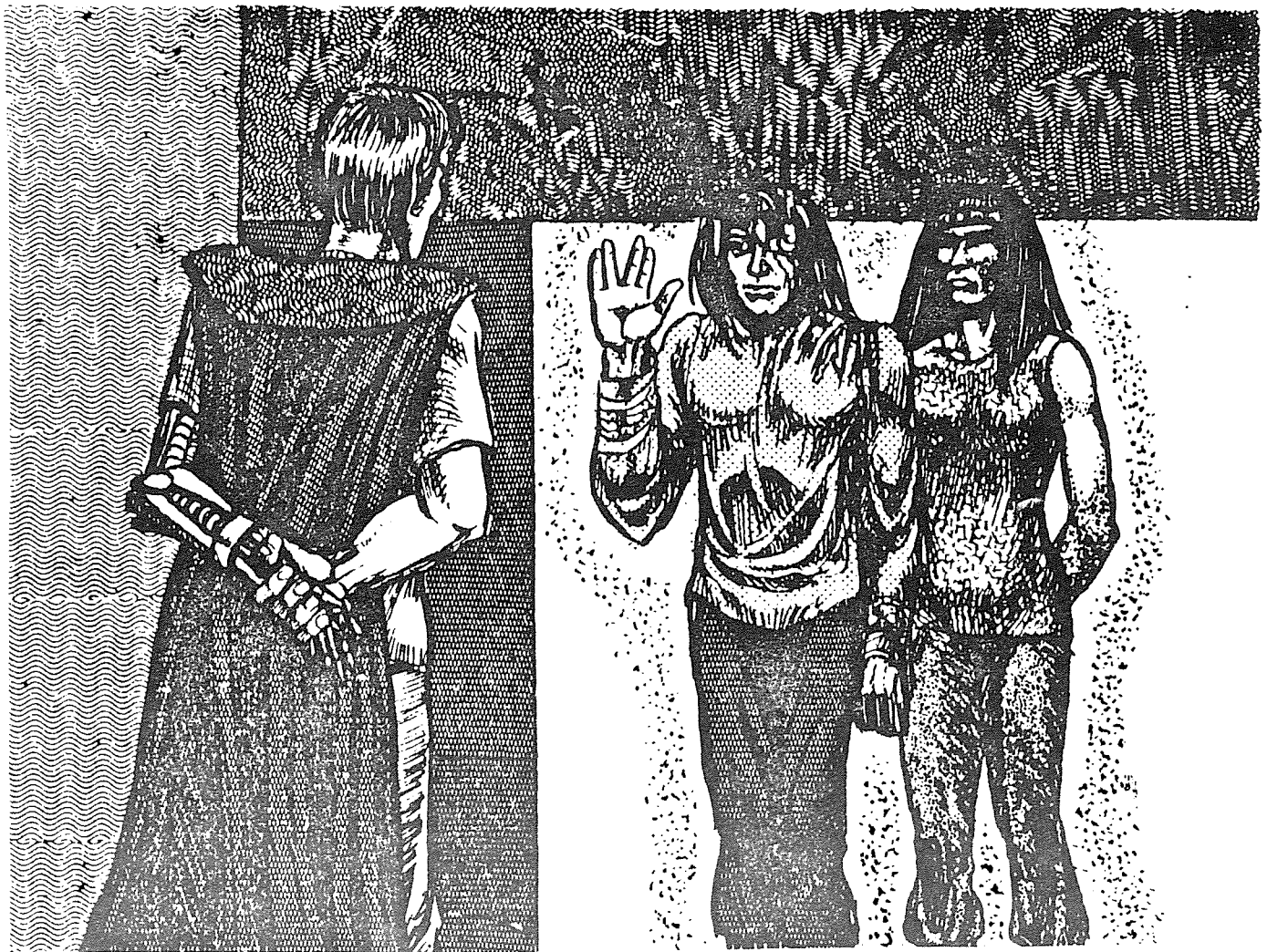
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Kirk and Quannechota materialized inside the research station within less than two meters of Sarek, who took a second to conceal a startled look. Quannechota made a mental note that Romulan transporter techniques were not as advanced as the Enterprise's, likewise noting that the Vulcan's hands were empty, and quietly put her phaser back on her belt.

Kirk studied the Vulcan up and down, seeing first the oddly-cut formal robe hastily donned over the lab-suit, then the glittering artificial left arm that was in no way disguised or concealed. This Sarek was likewise thinner and grayer and harder-looking than he'd been in the other universe. Kirk wondered how this Sarek had fared in a galaxy that had little need of ambassadors. Obviously he'd become some sort of research scientist, but Kirk somehow doubted that Sarek was satisfied with his position.

"I bid you welcome," said the Vulcan, scrutinizing the odd-looking couple. He had, he decided, never seen such savage creatures in his life. The male was seriously underweight and incredibly scarred; only the most rudimentary of prosthetic techniques had been used, despite the obvious sophistication of the visitors' vessel. The female also appeared underweight and overworked, not to mention pregnant. Sarek wondered how long these people kept their female warriors on duty before granting them pregnancy-leave, or indeed if they were granted leave at all. Even their clothing was crude and ill-fitting and showed signs of severe wear. He wondered if these creatures were so contemptuous of life that they used their bodies as negligible, disposable items...but no, creatures of such a mentality would not have bothered to contact and question him after the first exchange of fire. Perhaps the visitors were simply travelling under conditions of privation. "I request forgiveness for my initial inhospitality," he went on. "I was acting upon mistaken data; it is clear that you are not Klingons. Indeed, you are of a species that I do not recognize. What are you?"

"Humans," Kirk answered, noting that Sarek's voice sounded rusty, as if he hadn't used it recently. "We're from a small and very...faraway world. What made you think we were Klingons?"



"The first member of your crew whom I chanced to see resembled a Klingon." Sarek looked as close to embarrassed as any Vulcan could allow. "I was misled by the abundance of facial fur."

"Fur...Sparks' beard? Heh! Uh, that's a common decoration where we come from. It signifies, uh, maturity and...strength and ferocity." Romulans - warrior culture. Better impress him. "I, of course, don't need such things." He raised his head slightly, letting the overhead light pick out his scars. "Are you at war with the Klingons?"

Sarek gave him an odd look. "You appear to be familiar with the Klingons. How much contact have you had with them?"

"We've met a few. We don't like them."

"Indeed? How recently have you encountered them? And where?"

"The last time I saw a Klingon was nearly a year ago, and 'where' is a long story. Why? Are they much of a threat to you?" Kirk countered.

"Hostilities with the Klingon Empire officially ended with its destruction, 9.86 standard years ago," Sarek announced flatly. "How is it that your people are unaware of this situation?"

"Apparently your war did not touch every planet in the galaxy," Quannechota put in. "Until recently we were unknown to both the Klingons and your people. But if you destroyed the Klingon Empire 9.86 years ago, why did you attack our ship?"

"The extermination order still holds whenever survivors of the last attack are encountered."

"Extermination...order?" Kirk gulped. "You mean you wiped them out?"

"Not entirely," Sarek admitted, filing away that colorful idiom for future use. "Survivors were encountered in known space as recently as 3.18 years ago, and it is probable that there are more. But come, allow me to attend to your comfort." He turned and led the way toward a nearby doorway.

"Quanna," Kirk whispered as they followed the Vulcan. "Take it easy. Stop pushing at him. There's no point in antagonizing the man. Why are you doing it?"

"He is not a man, Jim," Quannechota insisted. "He is some variety of Romulan, and we know not what he may do. We must learn more, induce him to tell more, before we can trust him in any way. I, for one, don't like him."

"I'll be careful. You be quiet."

Sarek, being careful to pretend he hadn't heard that, led them into a small room austere furnished with a single table, two flat couches hastily arranged around it, and a squat little light-studded machine on wheels. Sarek gestured briefly to the machine, which quietly rolled out another door, and settled himself gracefully on one of the couches at the table. Quannechota reclined neatly on the other couch, and after a moment's puzzlement Kirk imitated her.

"I regret the lack of proper amenities," Sarek apologized, "but I receive very few visitors here and have no suitable guest arrangements. In fact, I believe that my last guests were the crew of the supply ship, some 2.5 years ago, and they did not remain long. I hope your Praetor will allow you to stay long enough to dine in leisurely fashion.

"Oh, of course we can stay that long," said Kirk. He's chatting to put us at ease, still has the talents of an ambassador. "Er, my 'Praetor,' you said? Whom do you mean?"

"Why the large female who challenged me after the brief exchange of hostilities. Is she not the commander of your vessel?"

"No," Kirk bristled. "I am. She's my sister."

"I beg pardon. Yes, I should have noticed the family resemblance. I am unfamiliar with your badges of rank. A natural mistake...."

He's talking too much, thought Quannechota. No visitors in two years.... Yes, easily induced to say much.

The little machine rolled back into the room, its flat top bearing a metal basin of water and three small towels. It deposited its burden on the table, then rolled to Sarek's couch and stationed itself beside him, draping one metal tentacle almost protectively around his booted ankle. Sarek reached for the bowl, ceremoniously washed his hands in the clear water, and dried them on his cloth. Kirk and Quannechota copied him as neatly as they could manage.

"Your life-forms are unfamiliar to me," Sarek resumed. "Will you allow me to take analytical readings on your metabolic systems?" He opened his coat - carefully and slowly, making it clear that he wasn't reaching for a weapon - and drew out an object that resembled a bulky tricorder. Kirk shrugged, not objecting.

"Him only," Quannechota insisted, not trusting the alien or his machine in the least. "The one reading will suffice for both."

Sarek smiled grim understanding, and carefully turned the machine away from her.

Puzzled at the odd request, Kirk turned to look at Quanna and saw that under the table she had pulled out her communicator - open - as well as her phaser. Paranoid, he thought. I keep forgetting that she's a

sav...primitive... He held still while Sarek pointed the growling tricorder-device at him, smiling a little at Quanna.

The Vulcan studied the readings, raised an elegant eyebrow, looked at Kirk and gave the Vulcan equivalent of a shrug. He removed some sort of cassette from the device, shut off the tricorder and put it aside. He put the cassette in a slot in the servo-mechanism and punched some of its lighted buttons. The machine obediently rolled away. Quannechota quietly put her phaser back on her belt.

"Suitable food shall be served presently," Sarek resumed. "I find your physiology intriguing. What is your world of origin?"

"We call it Earth," Quannechota answered before Kirk could think of a safe reply. "It is a small world of 70% oceanic surface, with one moon, the third planet of a minor yellow star approximately halfway from here to the galactic center. We had no contact with your people until 67 solar days ago. Have you received any information about this planet?"

"Negative, but I receive very little news here, outside of my research speciality. What mission brings you so far from home?"

"We might ask the same of you," Quannechota countered. "Why is your laboratory located so far from industrial and information centers? Are you watching for the possibility of an extra-galactic invasion force, or are you merely conducting dangerous weapons research?"

"Merely?!" snapped Sarek, radiating outraged professional pride. In the next instant he caught himself, realized how he'd been maneuvered into that little admission, and blushed pale green.

"I would, of course, be interested in learning the nature of the weapon under development," Quanna purred.

"And I, of course, would not relate to you any such information!"

"Then how can we be assured that you will not use our ship for target practice at the first opportunity?"

"Quite easily," Sarek glowered, seeing no other way out of the neat trap. "You are free to examine this dwelling unit. You will find only a few small laboratories, minimal deflection-shield and communications equipment, living quarters, and a single transport tunnel - now blocked by sealed emergency portals. Projecting the tunnel's direction, you will find that it originally led to the area which your ship so recently destroyed... along with my sole working model. Will that satisfy you?"

Quannechota smiled slightly, knowing that the Enterprise had overhead the whole exchange and was scanning the area at this very moment. "That will not be necessary," she said.

"I am honored," Sarek replied tonelessly, making a few guesses, a muscle in his jaw twitching. "Now if you will oblige me with some information in return, what manner of people are you? Where do you truly come from, with such a ship as that? How have you managed to avoid detection by our forces, and what is your intention here among the empty places at the galaxy's edge? You, Praetor..." He turned toward Kirk. "How do you know my name and homeworld, and the greeting which is not used even among all Vulcans? You said that we met before, but I have no such recollection, and I am certain that I would remember such a one as you. From what source do you know of me?"

"One thing at a time." Kirk couldn't help smiling. This Sarek was just as proud and short-tempered as the Vulcan he remembered. "There's no harm in telling you," he began pressing a reassuring hand to Quanna's wrist. "Are you familiar with the theory of...ah, parallel universes?"

Sarek blinked. "I am aware of the theory."

"Well, consider it no longer a theory. There are uncounted numbers of other universes lying parallel to yours. We come from one of them."

"I...see...." Sarek raised both eyebrows, thinking over the implications of that. "And what is your business in this one?"

"Nothing more than getting home again. We came here by accident, and we're out here on the rim of the galaxy in hopes of going back. You see, we think we can pass between universes by, uh, an interaction between our warp-drive and the galactic barrier. You know what kind of energy-levels are involved in the barrier...." He shrugged eloquently, hoping Sarek would take the idea and run with it.

Sarek did. "Indeed," he said, looking faintly dismayed. "We have lost many ships to the phenomenon. Surely you are aware of the dangers involved?"

"Oh yes," Kirk tried to sound nonchalant, riding a calculated guess about Romulan-Vulcan psychology. "The probability of success is small, I admit, but of course it's our duty to try."

"Of course," echoed Sarek, studying Kirk's scars and looking distinctly impressed. "I wish you success in your project. No doubt you will receive...suitable reward for having discovered our universe?"

"Oh, another commendation, maybe...if I'm lucky," dismissed that, guessing where this was leading. "This isn't the first time our people have bumped into somebody else's universe."

"Indeed?" Sarek was absolutely expressionless. "Then may we expect...delegations soon?"

Invasion forces, you mean? "Oh no," Kirk yawned in elaborate unconcern. "It takes too much energy-expenditure to cross from one universe to another, and with such a low probability of success, it just isn't worth it. There's much more to be gained from putting the same amount of effort into exploring our own universe. I really doubt that you'll ever see one of our ships here again." Amen!

"Yes, logical...." Sarek murmured, accepting that. "But enough conversation for the present; our meal is prepared."

Kirk turned to see the little servo-mechanism roll in bearing a tray with a stack of tableware, a decanter full of some red liquid, and three large serving-bowls full of assorted foods. As the machine set the dishes on the table Kirk saw that most of them were variations on a theme of vegetables and fruit, or meat with nuts and sauce. Apparently Sarek possessed a very sophisticated tricorder and food synthesizer. The vegetables were spicy and interesting, and the meat was very good. The drinks, which looked and tasted like slightly-alcoholic cherry juice, weren't bad either. Kirk was jarred to see Sarek calmly help himself to the meat dish. Either the Vulcan was going out of his way to prove that the food was quite safe, or the Romulan Way had made tremendous inroads on Vulcan. In silence Kirk addressed himself to the food and wondered how to approach the questions he badly wanted to ask.

As it turned out, Sarek was more than willing to open the subject. As the last dishes were emptied and the robot-servant carted them away, leaving fresh glasses and a fluted bottle of indescribably-flavored strong blue wine, Sarek leaned forward and picked up the conversation. "To restate my earlier question, Praetor; apparently you know me quite well in your universe. I have never used the old Vulcan greeting of my homeworld, indeed, not often then; yet you are familiar with it. Have you often visited the...analogue of my world?"

"A few times," said Kirk, getting a faraway look in his eye that Quannechota didn't like. "Mostly I learned that from...certain Vulcans I've met. One in particular...."

"Then it is not uncommon to find Vulcans off-world there?"

"You mean it IS uncommon to find Vulcans off-world here?" Quanna pounced. "Why is that?"

Kirk frowned at her. Sarek gave her a slit-eyed look. "Our culture is not designed to produce good soldiers," he answered stiffly. "47.8 years of...association with our long-absent cousins has not yet succeeded in changing that situation. There is little opportunity for Vulcans off-world, save on occasional scientific projects - such as this. But you say you knew me in this other universe, Praetor. What was our situation there?"

"I was Captain of that ship above us," Kirk replied, studying the blue liquid in his glass and noticing that it was almost exactly the color of Spock's shirt. "You were an...a liaison officer between Vulcan and the other worlds of the, ah, Empire. I met you in the course of my duties."

Quannechota, unnoticed, shook her head in admiration for Kirk's ability to tell a convincing tall tale on short notice.

"Truly?" Sarek raised an eyebrow. "Then Vulcan ranks high in the order of worlds in your Empire? We are valued for more than just our genetic material?"

"Uh, affirmative," Kirk gulped, making some guesses about Vulcan's status in this universe and how some Vulcans felt about it. "In fact, Vulcan's native culture is considered a tremendous asset. For one thing, it produces some of the best scientists in the galaxy."

Sarek gave an almost imperceptible sigh, and for an instant his eyes revealed an infinite regret.

"The only differences we have so far discovered between your universe and ours," Quanna smoothly interposed, "appears to be historical. We would appreciate a summary of your history."

Sarek paused and glanced at Kirk.

"If you please," Kirk nudged gently, "I'd be interested."

"Ours is an ironic story," the Vulcan sighed. "My warlike ancestors appear to have sown the seeds of their own destruction, in more ways than one. Were you aware that the Romulans themselves originated on Vulcan? Yes, it is true. Some 3500 of our years ago, our ancestors had progressed to the point of space-travel and ruled a modest empire in the Eridani sector. Having thoroughly subdued their environments and neighbors, and finding no other habitable worlds within easy reach, they did something they had never in their history had opportunity to do before; they paused to consider what to do next."

Sarek frowned ever so slightly. "That pause was their undoing. Our ancestors were unfortunately warlike and competitive by nature; nothing but the hostility of their environment had kept them co-operative through the centuries, and without such external pressure their social cohesiveness dwindled...." He sighed again and shook his head.

"Some of the more advanced social thinkers realized what was happening and sought some solutions. The most successful of these strove to restore social cohesion by early inculcation of strict military discipline. So long as this method was applied only to the common-soldier caste, the rulers were satisfied with it; but when these early sociologists insisted that their method be applied at every level of society, the ruling caste became...annoyed with them. The result was a long and complicated civil war. Records of the conflict are fragmentary and contradictory; all we can conclude is that the ruling caste invented an unknown weapon which gained them a nominal victory, yet left them with a disturbing number of captive rebels. Their decision, as nearly as we can tell, was to place the rebels in long-distance space vessels - apparently 'generation ships' and deport them into the unknown area toward the galactic rim."

The ghost of a wry smile played across Sarek's face. "Apparently the ship controls were locked or hidden or otherwise guarded in such a fashion that it took several generations for the rebels to gain control of them. By that time the ships had journeyed so far from our homeworld that the rebels had no hope of returning. They settled in the 'Romulus-Remus' system, from which they eventually founded the Romulan Empire."

"Hmmm, yes, this has been a common pattern in our history, too," Quannechota commented. "Many subsequently-powerful societies were founded in similar fashion: Rome, America, Australia...."

"Hush, I'm interested in the story," Kirk silenced her. "Please go on, Sarek. What happened to Vulcan?"

"Vulcan...." Sarek lowered his eyes to the basin of water that remained in the center of the table. "Perhaps it would have been better had my ancestors lost the war. Vulcan society continued to collapse. The



rulers apparently improved upon the weapons they had used to defeat the rebels, turning the same upon their own world, their own people, and each other. Civilizations crumbled, the first empire disintegrated, our population was cut to a bare remnant, even our ecology severely damaged - and still they fought.... Oh madness! Suicidal insanity on a planetary scale!"

The Vulcan paused, then raised his head. "Into this time came Surak, the Father of All We Became. He too offered a solution, a method of maintaining society, but without the violent elements of the earlier reformers. He preached a philosophy of total logic, complete suppression of the savagery of instinct, and respect for all life. He also taught certain mental disciplines that he had discovered, which proved advantageous to his disciplines. At first his philosophy was given little value or attention, but eventually a population weary of destruction and dismayed by the ecological damage to their world began paying serious attention to him. Some members of the ruling caste accepted his philosophy and impressed it upon their subjects, and the resulting political and economic successes of these unified realms helped to spread the word of Surak still further."

"Yes...similar pattern on Earth," Kirk murmured.

"Well, I shall not absorb your time with the details. Suffice to say that in time Surak's philosophy became the life-path of our entire world. It saved us from destruction, restored civilization, gave us sufficient prosperity and peace for more than twenty centuries."

"But it did not take you back to the stars in all that time," Quanna noted. "I would not call that perfection."

"Shut up and let him tell it," Kirk snapped at her.

"Unfortunately, the female is correct," Sarek admitted. "We did not regain spaceflight. Maintaining stability took precedence over the rediscovery of ancient technology. Of course, no weapons research was in any way allowed. There are some who claim that this was a mistake, that Surak's philosophy was limited in scope, that along with instinct and emotion we repressed imagination and creativity..." He sighed. "Such questions are now academic. We did not regain our empire, but the Empire reclaimed us." He glanced again at the still water in the basin. "Half a century ago, the descendants of the outcasts returned to their original world - and to us. They came in force, expecting the ferocity of their legendary ancestors. We had no defenses against them, no means of resistance, no choice but capitulation. Their method of maintaining social cohesion proved superior to ours in this one department at least; they conquered us. They conquered with such ease that they were amazed. They saw how we had changed, and they...laughed..." Sarek put his hands together, unconsciously twining his fingers around the unfeeling metal.

"I was quite young at the time, so perhaps the change was easier for me than for others. The young were transferred to Romulan schools and indoctrinated with the conquerors' ethics. The adults..." A shiver rippled down his arm. "They were given two choices: work obediently for the Empire of Rom, or be...used...solely as biological material. A few examples sufficed to convince the rest. I recall seeing my uncle used in that fashion..." He flinched and looked away. "It was a very convincing spectacle. Like many others of my generation, I concluded that Vulcan's best hope was to nominally accept Romulan rule, to strive for positions of influence within the Empire, and from there to gradually introduce Vulcan philosophy into Romulan culture. To this end I married into a Romulan family. My Vulcan relations were not pleased. I have managed to gain much standing in the Empire, but have had limited success in the other part of the plan..."

Sarek abruptly shook himself, like a swimmer coming up out of deep water. "Of course, I am more familiar with Vulcan-Romulan history than with the affairs of other parts of the Empire. I fear I have only a rudimentary knowledge of such affairs as the Defeat of the Gorn, for example, or the Suborning of Tholia, or the Melkotian Destruction, but ask me what you will and I shall give you what knowledge I possess."

"The...'Melkotian Destruction?'" Kirk was intrigued. "What was that about? How did the Romulans deal with the Melkotians' powers of illusion?"

"I see your people have had dealings with the Melkotians; perhaps they would be pleased to learn how the illusionists were destroyed. Our first contact-teams were annihilated; subsequent explorers attempted to relay information, but their communications systems were blocked. Eventually the Empire designated the entire Melkotian system a hazard to navigation, and dealt with it accordingly. Another contact-team was sent in as a diversionary tactic while a heavily-shielded robot-ship with automatic settings carried a large anti-matter-pack into the Melkotian sun. The resulting explosion reduced all planets in the system to cinders or less, whereupon the Melkotians ceased to trouble anyone."

"Oh." Kirk took a long drink of his blue wine. "The...political situation in our universe is somewhat different. We managed to make contact with the Melkotians, even the beginnings of an alliance, mainly thanks to...to..." Spock. "Sarek, in my universe you had a son. He was the First Officer on my ship, and called best in the fleet. He was also my friend."

"Where...is he...now?" Sarek's face was expressionless, but very pale.

"He died...as a result of the accident that brought us here." Please please don't let my voice shake!
"Could you please tell me where he is and what he's doing in this universe?"

Sarek turned away, his eyes clenched shut in uncontrollable pain. "My son died, 12.03 years ago," he said.

"I see." Kirk fixed his eye on the blue wine in his glass, vividly recalling Spock's face, while his heart turned over and sank. "How did it happen?"

"He was the last prisoner taken by the Klingons." Sarek still didn't look up. "He was taken by surprise and treachery, while studying and cataloguing new planets on our known-space border. The vermin captured and studied him, attempted to extract useful information from him, made sport of him, and finally sent him home in mutilated condition as an attempt to terrorize us."

Sarek turned back to Kirk, his eyes flickering with tints of green. "The tactic failed. Not only did we scorn to fear such creatures, but we gained useful information concerning the location of the Klingon home-system. That information was gained by my son, even as he was held captive. For this action he was awarded the station of Imperial hero, and I was allowed the honor of leading the central attack force which destroyed the Klingon homeworld." His fingers opened and shut, unconsciously squeezing his artificial arm.

"Uh-huh...." Kirk mumbled, staring wide-eyed at the Vulcan and trying to match that stark commentary with the Sarek he knew. For a moment he couldn't make himself think about what had happened to Spock.

"Unfortunately, the campaign was costly. The Klingons possessed superior ships and weaponry, and it was expensive to eliminate them. For that reason I was granted this research station, in hopes of developing more effective defenses." He smiled thinly. "I was also elevated to the Tree-of-Fire caste. Only to the 32nd degree, of course - a Vulcan could not expect more - but it is the Royal Kindred nonetheless. My wife would have been quite pleased, had she lived." He waved his metal hand to indicate the room, the labs beyond, the whole barren world of which he was lord and sole living occupant. "I find it a most satisfactory arrangement."

"Yes. Understandable." Kirk did his best to sound calm while his imagination fleshed out the bare outlines of the story. One gap in the pattern couldn't be filled without more information, much as he dreaded it. "But you said your son came home alive. How...did he die?"

Sarek's gaze wandered around the room awhile, then returned to the basin of water in the center of the table. "He had been...damaged by the Klingons...." The Vulcan was clearly talking to himself as much as to his guests. Kirk wondered how long it had been since anyone had dared to mention the subject to him. "Not content with simple extraction of information, perhaps because they did not obtain anything useful, they dared to amuse themselves with him...even unto wluptatrox...." The Romulan word was brief and ugly. What the translator quoted was considerably longer, quite complex, and just as ugly. Kirk closed his eye and shuddered. "...and they also guaranteed that he would die in his next pon-farr." The metal under the Vulcan's absently clutching fingers began to creak with pressure. "He chose not to endure in such condition. Since he was...incapable of giving himself Steel Passage, he...requested my assistance. I gave it. He died quickly, painlessly, and with honor." Sarek fell silent, eyes fixed on the bowl of water, lost in memories.

"Oh God," Kirk whispered, resting his face in his hands. "Maybe drowning was better."

"Drowning?" Sarek asked, puzzled, pulling out of his reverie. "Is that how my son died in your universe?"

"Yes," Kirk recovered. "We were...inspecting this universe's equivalent of our homeworld, and a flash-flood came, and...I couldn't save him. All these months I've held onto the hope that somewhere in this universe Spock was still alive, and now...."

"'Spock?'" Sarek blinked. "Who is Spock? My son's name was Selek."

"Huh?! But...." Selek. That was the name Spock used when he....

"I admit I had planned to name my next son Spock, but it was not my fortune to have another son. I have two surviving daughters. The third died, as did my wife, in the course of the Klingon War."

Only daughters, one of them dead, Kirk thought. He wondered in passing how Sarek had managed to survive more than seven years without a wife, but knew better than to ask. Three daughters...Jenneth! Could one of them be...? "What are their names?"

"My daughters' names?" Sarek almost smiled reminiscently. "My wife, Aerea, was most insistent that they should have good Romulan names, since I had named our firstborn in the Vulcan fashion. She called them Baka, N'Lathia, and D'Kax. It was Baka who died; she was gunner on the Meteor when it rammed a Klingon troop-carrier. My other daughters currently serve on the scoutships Ferax and Mon'tum."

"I see." The names were no help. "I don't mean to impose, but do you have a...a picture of your children?"



Sarek paused a moment, then reached under the collar of his tunic and pulled out a large rectangular pendant. He lifted the thin chain off his neck and handed it without comment to Kirk. Kirk looked closely at the pendant and saw it was a tri-dee photograph in a simple setting. The chain from which it hung was worn smooth and thin, and Kirk wondered if the Vulcan wore it all the time.

The picture was a formal family portrait, parents and children stiffly dressed in their best clothes, neatly posed on a stone bench in front of a wall decorated with an obscure symbol. At one end of the bench, draped in what looked like a streamlined toga, Sarek sat holding a pudgy pointy-eared baby in one arm. At the other end of the bench sat a heavy-boned Romulan woman in uniform, holding two little girls on her lap and plainly smiling. One of the girls was a toddler in a simple shift; the other was perhaps nine years old... really too big to sit on her mother's lap - leggy and blue-eyed and wearing a scaled-down less-decorated copy of her mother's uniform. It was obvious who the wife's favorite was. Between them sat an adolescent boy, his hands and feet a size too large, dressed like his father, hair hanging forward over his shoulder in a long horse-tail. He was leaning slightly toward Sarek, who had one arm draped around the boy's shoulders, and both of them looked utterly content.

"We had so few children," Sarek murmured. "Single births only, in the Vulcan fashion."

Kirk only nodded, staring at that quiet revelation of Romulan private life. It was strange to think of the merciless, warlike Romulans having close, happy families...actually loving their children, as Sarek had obviously loved his son.

Selek, not Spock. The boy didn't resemble Spock in the slightest. Neither did any of the girls. The children all looked like their mother, the big-boned Romulan soldier, and there was nothing of Spock about them. But if not here, then where? If he's not Spock, then who is?

"You say that your son died twelve years ago," said Quannechota. "How old was he when he died?"

"Thirty-one standard years. The picture is old."

He'd be forty-three now. Too young, thought Kirk. He's not here. Still lost. Was he even born in this universe? Does he exist here at all? Abruptly, he began to cough. Quannechota took the portrait from his clenched hands and pounded him on the back, but it was a long time before the fit passed. He felt weak and dizzy when it was over.

Quannechota handed the pendant back to Sarek and helped Kirk swallow some of the blue wine. It helped a little. Sarek resettled the pendant on his neck, frowning in thought. "Guest-Kirk," he said, "surely you are aware that you are ill."

"Ah, yes, I know," Kirk panted, setting down the wineglass. "Don't worry, it's only the Wheezes. It'll pass."

"Indeed?" Sarek lifted an eyebrow. "What amazing immune-mechanisms you must have...."

"Sarek," Kirk halted him, remembering something else that had nagged him for weeks. "On our way out here we passed a Doomsday Machine. It's a huge planet-wrecker, several thousand years old. It breaks up planets and uses the pieces for fuel, and it's on course for Vulcan. It should get there in about 18 years. We didn't have the means to destroy it when we saw it, but we do know how it can be destroyed: feed it an antimatter bomb - maybe disguised as a small asteroid - and make sure it detonates inside the ship, because there's no way to harm the thing from the outside. The hull's collapsed neutronium, and no weapon can get through it. Can you pass that information along to the fleet, so they'll know how to deal with it when they find it?"

"Gladly," said the Vulcan, giving him an odd look. "I am most honored by the gift."

Quannechota wondered just how important the gift was, and what use Sarek would make of it, particularly among other Romulans.

"Gift?" said Kirk. "Oh, the information.... Well, let's say that for the sake of one Vulcan I knew and admired, it's the least I can do."

Quannechota's communicator gave a whistle. She picked it up quickly, before either man could notice that it was already open, and acknowledged the call.

"The Hot Seat's all repaired," Sparks' cheerful bellow informed them, "And the bridge is de-bugged. We can warp off anytime now. When are you two coming up?"

"In another minute, Sparks." Kirk finished his wine and stood up. The others did likewise. "Sarek, I wish I could stay and talk with you awhile longer, but we have to get on with our mission."

"Understood, Guest-friend."

The transporter-hum began to sound around them. Sarek took a step backward, just to be safe. As the transporter-shimmer appeared Kirk raised his hand in the Vulcan salute and gave the ritual words of leavetaking. "Peace and long life, Sarek."

Sarek hadn't heard or given the proper response in many years, but he remembered it. "Live long and prosper, Voyager Kirk."

A moment later Kirk and Quannechota stood on the transporter platform, home safe on the Enterprise. Kirk didn't say a word until they were out in the corridor, but as soon as they were alone he took Quannechota by the arm and swung her around to face him.

"All right, let's have it," he snapped. "Why were you so hostile to him? There was more to it than just being cautious; you practically insulted him at every turn. Why did you do it, Quanna? Was it just because he's an alien, or what?"

"Jim," she replied levelly, "I had no reason to trust him; he is after all, the servant of a State - and history tells us what that leads to. I admit that I also may have been swayed by an intuitive dislike, but

I assure you that his simple alienness had nothing to do with it. I am not a bigot; I just do not like that man."

"Well, I do! I have good reason to. He's so much like the Sarek of my universe...." Kirk let go of her arm and rested his hand gently on her shoulder. "Look, Quanna, you saw the tapes about the Guardian of Forever; did you also read my report about what happened when we discovered it? Yes, of course you did. That isn't the whole story, Quanna. There was a girl - Edith Keeler, the one I had to let die - I was...I fell in love with her. That's what made it so hard to.... It took me a long time to get over it, and the person who helped me the most was Sarek."

Quannechota gave him an odd look, eyebrow raised.

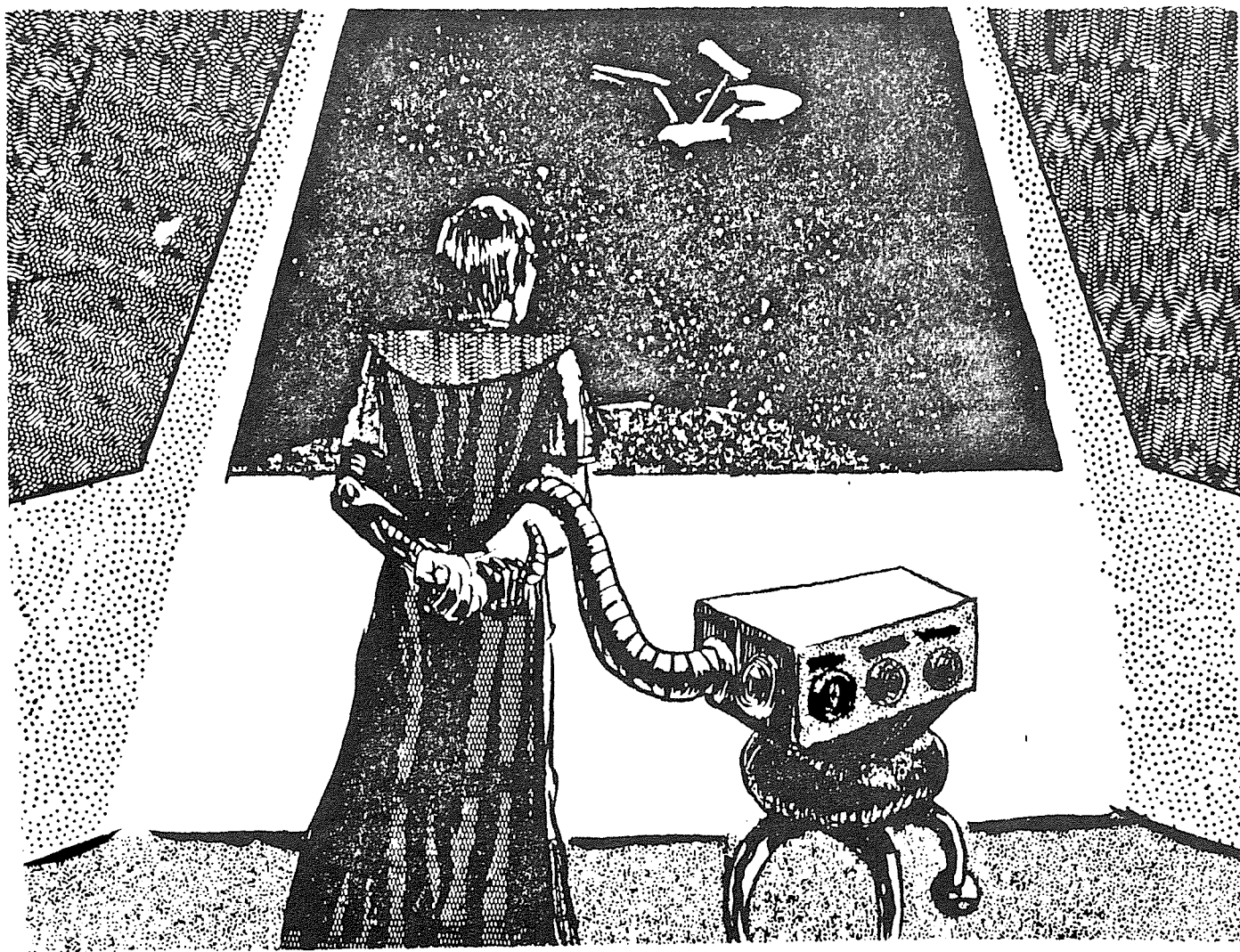
"I had some leave-time - that's sort of a vacation - and I spent it on Vulcan at Spock's suggestion. He thought the...serenity of Vulcan would help me, and it did help a little, but not enough. He tried to help me himself, but even that wasn't enough. It was Sarek who finally got through to me - amazing how much he could understand of human grief - and it was because of him that I was able to go back and resume my...my work. I came to know him well, and he's so much like this Sarek that I knew I could trust him."

"I hope your trust was not misplaced," Quannechota conceded.

"Fine. Now let's get back to work."

Quanna shrugged and followed him to the bridge.

On the planet below, Sarek stood a long time staring sightlessly at the space where the visitors had vanished, thinking long thoughts, while the little servo-mechanism silently cleared the table. At length he turned



and went into the main laboratory and activated the viewscreen. He looked out at the stars for a long time after the mysterious ship had warped out of orbit and fled away. Eventually the servo-mechanism rolled up beside him and rested one waiting tentacle on his arm. Sarek patted it absently, considering how strange it was that these utter aliens had come such incredible distances, across space and time and unknown dimensions, to give him the first real comfort he had known in years.

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Captain's Log, Stardate 6201.7.

GOD, BUT IT'S BEEN A LONG DAY. THE ROACHES, SCOTTY'S NEAR BREAKDOWN, SAREK, THE ENDLESS QUESTIONS AFTERWARD.... I FINALLY TOLD THEM TO LEAVE ME ALONE, AND QUIT THE BRIDGE EARLY. I SUPPOSE M'BENGA WILL BE PLEASED, DAMN HIM, SCOTTY WASN'T. THE SHAPE HE'S IN NOW. LEAVING HIM ALONE UP THERE WITH JENNETH MEANS THAT FOR ALL PRACTICAL PURPOSES, SHE'S ACTING-CAPTAIN. HELL, SHE CAN HANDLE IT. BESIDES, SULU'S DOWN THERE. THEY'LL MANAGE.

SAREK...OF ALL THE PEOPLE TO MEET OUT HERE! POOR, BITTER, LONELY OLD MAN...LOST ALMOST EVERYTHING.... BUT HE SHOWED ME SOMETHING AMAZING ABOUT ROMULANS - AND VULCANS. I WISH I COULD HAVE STAYED LONGER, TALKED FURTHER. QUANNA STILL CAN'T EXPLAIN WHY SHE DISLIKED HIM SO MUCH. LEFTOVER PREJUDICES FROM HER PRIMITIVE BACKGROUND, I SUPPOSE. SOMETIMES IT'S HARD TO REMEMBER THAT THESE PEOPLE ARE BASICALLY BARBARIANS.

SPOCK'S GONE. UTTERLY GONE. MAYBE HE WAS SAREK'S SON OR ONE OF HIS DAUGHTERS, BUT MORE LIKELY HE WAS NEVER BORN. I DIDN'T REALIZE HOW MUCH I'D BEEN HOPING.... WELL, I'LL FIND HIM ON THE OTHER SIDE OF TIME. I'LL FIND HIM ON THE OTHER SIDE, OR DIE TRYING.

* * * * *

The evening beer-party was actually more subdued than most; only ten pitchers of beer had been drunk in an hour and a half, only a few dances were called for, and for the most part the Anarchists preferred to smoke their odd-smelling pipes and listen to Roantree sing. In fact, the only noticeably lively guest was Kirk. He had danced every reel, sung along with every chorus, and drunk more beer than anyone else. It was most unlike him.

Quannechota, sitting out the dances to mollify an unsteady stomach, noted that his eye was brighter than normal and his face was a little more flushed than the beer would account for. Perhaps his persistent case of Wheezes had given him a slight fever, or perhaps he was still tense from that meeting with the Romulan. I am, Materra knows, she admitted, toying with her unwanted beer. She felt a distinct twitch in her belly and pressed a hand over it. Much motion lately. Tension not good now. I could take a pipe.... No, I may need to be clear-headed when he comes to bed. His moods shift so erratically these days.... She tried another sip of beer. It hit bottom and threatened to bounce back up. Enough, she decided, abandoning her mug on a convenient table. Nausea, tension - not good. I must lie down and sing myself calm. She glanced again at Kirk and saw that Roantree was watching him too. She'll take care of him. No need to interrupt his enjoyment. Quannechota got up and unobtrusively left for her cabin.

Roantree noted the departure and swung her attention back to Kirk without missing a word of her current song.

Look inside your bathroom closet. Tell me what you see.
Baby roaches! Baby roaches!
They are in your kitchen cabinet and in your pan-ter-ee,
Baby roaches! Baby roaches!
They have little-bitty feelers, and little-bitty legs,
and they'll all grow up to lay a lot of little-bitty eggs.
Even roaches need somebody, and why shouldn't it be you
Baby roaches - so cute!

The crowd whooped and cheered and cackled, and various Anarchists tossed out cockroach jokes, old and new. Roantree took the opportunity to check the tuning on her 12-string. Ann Bailey, slightly the worse for

several beers and two bowls of pipe-weed, lurched over to Kirk and patted him clumsily on the shoulder. "Hey, Big Jim," she chortled, "tell us again about how you talked your way around that Romulan sheep."

"I don't know what you mean," Kirk bristled. "He was lonely, being isolated out there for years, and he wanted somebody to talk to. I didn't have to say very much. And why did you call him a sheep? That hardly fits any Romulan."

"You dunno? Ah, other towns, other customs." Bailey thumped his shoulder again. "Sheep follow leaders... right over cliffs or into the slaughtering pen. 'Sheep' is our word for somebody who follows a gov'ment, see? Back in the ol' days, people useta go sheeping after all kindsa tyrants. Sure 'nuff, they got led into slaughtering pens. A sheep's a sucker for a govern'mint, a toady. You know - bureaucrats an' cops an' scabs an' soldiers. That kinda thing."

"Sarek - That Romulan wasn't a soldier; he was a research scientist. I thought you approved of that."

"Yeah, but he toadied to a gover'mint didn't he? Got his job and all his set-up from some State-pigs somewhere, right? Okay, he's a sheep. Sheep like him made Science hated, back on Earth." She frowned and slumped into the nearest chair. "The histories tell us all 'bout that. There useta be scientists who whored for gov'mints, back in the bad ol' days. They made scientists look bad, makin' weapons and plagues and spy-machines and brain-washing methods, whenever the State-pigs asked 'em too. When people got sick and tired of the pigs they got rid of 'em, an' the sheep-scientists fell along with 'em. That's how Science got a bad name, bad as gover'ment. That's why the Luddite bastards tried ta kill us, kill our kids.... I hate sheep, almost as bad as pigs!" She slugged down her beer to the accompaniment of several "Right on" mutters from nearby Anarchists.

Kirk was too peeved for caution. "Uh-huh, sure. So you think that any poor son of a bitch who had the bad taste to be born in a government-ruled territory is a sheep? Oh, that's great; blame somebody for where he was born, stick a label on him, and shoot him!"

"I wasn't talkin' about where people were...."

"As long as you're doing that, why stop with calling him a sheep? Why not 'nigger' while you're at it? Why not...."

"But 'nigger' doesn't mean that! It means 'somebody's whipping-boy and punching bag.' 'Sheep' means somebody who loves gover'ments, believes in 'em, likes being pushed around by 'em...."

"Sure! So when you find some poor bastard who was born and raised under a government, never knew of anything else, goes along with it because that's all he knows - never mind his innocence - go ahead and shoot him! Blame the poor footsoldiers for the crimes of the general!" Kirk was noticeably flushed now.

"Well, dammit, how long can a general last without soldiers to order around and protect him?" Bailey's never-tolerant temper was beginning to rise despite the mellowing pipe-weed.

"And that's a nice easy excuse for treating somebody else's troops like garbage; call them a name, dehumanize them, never ever admit that they just might be decent people if given a chance, never give them credit for having brains or courage or any sense of honor or even loving their children...."

"Jim, hey, tune it down," Roantree intervened. "It's time for another song."

"Song?!" Kirk was too engrossed to take the hint. "Why don't you make a song for that poor damned Vulcan sitting on a dead world back there, with nothing to talk to but his machines? Sing me a fitting ballad for this time-line's Sarek, second-class citizen from a scorned planet, who lost everything he loved to the Klingons.... Dammit, to you he may be just another Romulan footsoldier, but in my universe he was my best friend's father, and I swear there were times when he was more of a father to me than my own...." He stopped short, hit by a sudden feeling of shock. He didn't have to look to know that it came from Roantree. Transmitting! He felt the blood drain from his face. Stop. Get out of here, before I say or think or feel too much.... He set down his beer-mug fast, muttered a quick "Excuse me," climbed to his feet and hurried out of the room.

"Drunk," Sparks judged, "and about to be sick."

"Who pulled his string?" Bailey complained.

"You did," said Roantree. "You shouldn't have bad-mouthed that Romulan. You didn't even meet him, remember, and don't you know that he was Jim's father-in-law on the other side?"

"Huh! Well, that makes it a little clearer, but still.... 'My kin, right or wrong.' That's childish an' immoral. He's a bad-tempered fool."

"He's also sick, Ann. Haven't you noticed how thin he's getting? He's running his health down on this project, and the Wheezes aren't helping any. That's why his temper's short." Roantree grinned. "As I recall, Tugboat Annie, you temper's no laughing matter when you're feeling poorly. You're worse than a bull with a toothache!"

The rest of the Anarchists laughed heartily, and several shouted for more songs. Roantree picked one and started strumming. Bailey retreated into grumbling and more beer.

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Project Tape R-194, Roantree recording.

SLIGHT SQUABBLE AT THE PARTY TONIGHT, WHICH I MANAGED TO SMOOTH OVER; BAILEY BAD-MOUTHED THE ROMULAN, JIM HIT THE CEILING AND SAID A LOT OF OFF-THE-WALL THINGS, THEN GOT SICK AND LEFT. HIS HEALTH'S POOR AND GETTING NO BETTER. NOBODY ELSE MINDED MUCH, BUT BAILEY'S FAMOUS FOR HER SHORT TEMPER, NARROW-MINDED MORALISM, AND TENDENCY TO HOLD GRUDGES. I HOPE JIM HASN'T MADE A BAD ENEMY.

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Kirk left the observation deck feeling a little better, but still angry. He'd always known the Romulans to be brave, intelligent, well-disciplined - good fighting men, the kind he could respect, even as enemies. What he'd learned from Sarek had impressed him still more. This pack of ignorant savages had no right to sneer at them. 'Sheep' indeed! he fumed as he strode down the corridors. What do they know about it? They think Romulans are so bad, let them try Orion slavers, or Kzinti, or Klingons....

He toyed with thoughts of the Anarchists bumping into Klingons, finding out first-hand what real tyranny was like, especially for the women. It would be almost fun to see what the Klingons would do to Bailey - or Jenneth. ...Thinks she's as strong as I am? They'll show her! She'll wish she had a man to protect her, like a real woman, but it'll be too late.... He stalked into his darkened cabin nursing a vengeful fantasy of Jenneth standing in an Orionesse slave-market with a collar on her neck and a price-tag on her hip, and Bailey standing beside her - wearing a tag with a much lower price.

At that point he realized just what he was thinking and stopped short, horrified at himself. Jesus; that's disgusting! What's the matter with me? Lucky Jenneth didn't overhear...'overthink?'.... Hell, I should take a shower.

He pulled off his outer shirt and moved toward the living area, then stopped again. Something was wrong. Something had triggered a subliminal warning. He stood perfectly still until he could identify what it was.

The air. It smelled wrong. It smelled of blood.

Blood? Whose??? Kirk held his breath and listened. Under the regular ship-sounds he could hear faint, harsh breathing. It was coming from behind the screen. "Who's there?" he shouted, louder than necessary.

The reply was more a groan than a clear word. "...Jim...." It was Quannechota's voice.

Kirk dashed around the screen and saw it all in the first glance. Quanna lay sprawled across the bed, one arm stretched toward the intercom and not quite reaching it. Her other hand clawed blindly at her abdomen



Her face was contorted with pain, and the color of old parchment. There was blood under her.

Kirk lunged at the intercom and yelled for Sickbay.

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QUANNA'S IN THE INTENSIVE-CARE UNIT. THEY WON'T LET ME SEE HER. M'BENGA WON'T EVEN TELL ME WHAT'S WRONG. TOO BUSY. HE RUNS IN, RUNS OUT, SAYS "NOT NOW," AND I SWEAR I'LL BREAK HIS NECK IF ANYTHING HAPPENS TO HER! "GO GET SOME REST" - HAH! I'LL CAMP OUT IN THAT WAITING-ROOM UNTIL I GET SOME ANSWERS!

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It was Christine Chapel who finally put an end to the vigil. She waited until M'Benga had gone off to the lab, then tiptoed out to where Kirk was pacing a trench in the deck and led him into the intensive-care unit, whispering reassurances that Quanna was out of danger and warning him not to tire her with too many questions. Kirk was obediently soundless as he followed her into the room and tiptoed up beside the bed.

Quannechota looked thinner than usual under the blankets, and her sleeping face was pinched and bloodless. Kirk sat down beside her and took one of her hands, not noticing as Christine checked the readings and slipped away. He saw, as if for the first time, that there were four simple-band rings on Quanna's moon-scarred hand: one on the fourth finger and three on the middle finger. One of the three rings was gold, one was silver, and one was roughly enamelled black. Kirk guessed that the black one was Christopher Pike's. The gold one was probably from Sparks. But what does that silver one mean? ...Is it from Jenneth? He ran his thumb over the solitary gold band on her fourth finger, and felt her hand stir. He looked up to see her eyes slowly pulling open.

"Quanna," he murmured, bending close. "Quanna, it's me. I'm here. You're all right now. You're safe, and everything's going to be all right."

"No," she whispered, wearily shaking her head. "Not all right. Miscarriage. Lost the child."

"Oh." Kirk shut his eye and let the pain wash over him, trying to adjust to that. All he could think was that this was the second child he'd lost unborn, unseen. At least this time he still had the wife. "It's all right," he repeated. "We can try again."

"No," Quanna sighed, too exhausted even for grief. "Can't. No good. Doctor told me. Even with you...I can only...breed monsters."

"What?! M'Benga told you that?!?" Kirk snapped upright, shocked at the idea that any doctor would tell a woman such a thing, at such a time, and in such words.

Quannechota read something else in his reaction. "I cannot make...healthy children...with you...." she clarified bitterly. "I am...sorry. Disappointed you. I will not...bind you...." She drew her hands together and wearily began to tug off his ring.

"NO!" Kirk yelled, horrified. He half-fell across her and seized her hands in a paralyzing grip. "Don't! Please, please...Oh, can't you understand?! It isn't...wasn't the child. We can always adopt some, or something. That isn't the only reason.... Don't you realize I want you for something more than just a... brood mare? I love you, Mira- no, Quanna - oh please - don't leave me!"

His hands shook so hard that she could feel the tremors up to her shoulders. No one could have doubted the desperate sincerity in that voice, or face. Quannechota relaxed her hands in his grip and slowly, hesitatingly, smiled up at him. "If you wish...truly...."

"I wish! Oh, I do!" Kirk gathered her up in his arms and kissed her face from eyes to chin, and whispered fragments of passionate nonsense while she snuggled against him. She hugged back, weakly, buried her face against his neck, and let herself drift. Kirk ran out of words and rocked her in his arms, and let the moments pass. It took him a long time to notice that her skin was chilly and rough with goose-bumps, longer still to accept that she really was better off lying down under the thermal blankets. Reluctantly, very gently, he lowered her back to the pillows and tucked the blankets up around her chin. She thanked him with a weak smile, and her eyes drifted shut.

Kirk was still sitting beside her when the doors opened and M'Benga and Nurse Chapel came in. Christine, carrying a transfusion unit, gave him a quick smile and busied herself with her task. Kirk got up to go, found himself looking M'Benga in the face, and had to consciously restrain himself from punching the doctor's teeth out. Be calm, he ordered himself. It might not be true. Maybe she overreacted, or heard it wrong. Find out. He stepped away from the bed, allowing M'Benga to take some quick readings, waited patiently until the examination was finished, and caught the doctor on his way out.

"Are you quite certain that she can't have normal children with me?" Kirk demanded, very calmly, aligning the doctor in his mirrors as if in the cross-hairs of a gunsight.

"Yes, I'm afraid so," M'Benga answered readily, quite relieved that someone else had handled the messy business of breaking the bad news to the Captain. He had always had trouble dealing with the emotional outbursts that often followed such revelations to humans. The barbarian woman had accepted the facts surprisingly well, and no doubt she'd told the Captain. That problem out of the way, he could now get on to a calm discussion of the details. "Frankly, she can't have healthy children with anyone. Her chromosomes are so disarranged that I'm surprised she's physically normal herself. It's incredible that she carried the fetus as long as she did."

"Oh?" Kirk replied mildly, clutching his hands behind his back to keep from pounding that insensitive face into red jelly. "Was it a boy or a girl?"

"Neither." M'Benga repressed a delicate shudder. "Or both. It was amazingly deformed. The woman really ought to be sterilized."

Behind him, Kirk saw Quanna drag her eyes open and give M'Benga's turned back an unfathomable look. She'd heard that. She'd heard the whole thing.

"Doctor," Kirk's voice was quiet, but unmistakeably menacing, "as soon as we're back in our own universe, I want to see your transfer application on my desk. Until then, I don't want to see any sign of you." He gave a neat about-face and marched out of the room.

M'Benga gaped after him, taken completely by surprise. Why, he wondered in passing, Why did I ever leave this nice neat laboratory, my modest little research program, my wonderfully calm and logically predictable colleagues on Vulcan, to go running around in space with a shipload of crazy people? "Medical experience?" Hang on! Medical experience! I want to go back to my lab, and talk to nobody but Vulcans! "Whu...whaaa...what brought you back on?" He finally managed to say.

"You did, Doctor," Nurse Chapel answered sweetly, "and I think you'd better take his advice - for medical reasons."

"What medical reasons?"

"In order to preserve your health."

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Object Tape R-196, Roantree recording.

FOUND. HE'S IN SICKBAY WITH QUANNA. CALL OFF THE HUNT.

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Once out of the intensive-care unit, Kirk slowed his pace. He had no idea where to go, what to do, how to think. There was a great ringing hollow place inside him that swallowed up all his attention now that his worry and rage were gone. He vaguely noticed Chekov and Sulu sitting in the corridor in front of the blood-bank, holding small pressure-bandages to their arms.

"...no right to sneer at poor Sarek like that," Sulu was saying. "It wasn't his people that made this universe what it is...." His voice trailed off as he glanced up and saw Kirk.

"Er, hello, Keptain," Chekov offered. "We're here to giff blood for the poor ledy."

"Yes, Sir," Sulu agreed. "Everybody with the right blood-type was glad to help."

In confirmation, the blood-bank door opened and Jean Battre-Le-Diable came out, holding his arm and looking a little pale. Behind him, John Yellowhorse was momentarily visible as he rolled up his sleeve. Kirk considered in passing how an emergency could bring people together, murmured a vague "Thank you" to everyone, and moved on. A wake of pitying glances trailed after him.

Roantree and Sparks were in the waiting room when he got there. "Jim," said Roantree, stepping forward, "you've seen Quanna? How is she?"

"Hurt. Tired." His hands twitched. "She lost the baby. It was.... I can't give her a healthy one. Nobody can."

The Anarchists looked at each other, an old familiar bleakness passing over their faces like wind over dry grass. Roantree looked aside for a moment and thought hard. "...Maybe not in this universe," she said, holding her tattooed hand over her chin. "But in yours...."

"M'Benga says she ought to be sterilized."

Sparks took him firmly by the shoulders. "Screw that," he said, "with a barberry bush."

For a moment Kirk could actually see himself doing just that little thing to M'Benga. He laughed. The laughter turned into another coughing fit, and he leaned weakly against Sparks until it passed. Sparks and Roantree exchanged glances across him.

"Jim," said Roantree, tapping his shoulder. "Is there anything more we can do here, right now?"

Still winded, Kirk shook his head.

"In that case, let's go to your cabin and wait. It'll be a hell of a lot more private than here."

Kirk wanted to stay, but he didn't have the energy to argue with her. He let the two Anarchists lead him away, hardly seeing any details of the short and silent journey. The hollow place inside him ached, and he was unspeakably tired. Once in his cabin he trudged straight through to the sleeping area and dropped to the bed, not noticing or much caring what the other two did. From inertia of habit he took off his boots and his Crown-of-Mirrors, but then his hands slowed and fell slack. He leaned his back against the bulkhead, drew up his knees and rested his forehead on them, and finally wrapped his arms around himself to make a small bundle of silent misery, featureless as an egg, shielded from light and sound.



"Jim. Hey, Jim...." A deep voice resonated, too close to be easily ignored. A big heavy arm settled around his shoulders and pulled him a few degrees over, against a beard-obscured chest as broad as a bass drum. Too weary for resistance, Kirk let himself sag against Sparks and go completely limp. He was dully surprised to find the position comfortable, even distantly comforting. From somewhere nearby he heard soft notes from Roantree's 12-string: a quiet, elaborate, unrecognized tune. He wished he could sleep, but the pain from that vast aching hollow wouldn't let him go.

Roantree played steadily through her adaptation of Bach's "Air for the G String," considering how to proceed. She didn't know what songs moved him; she'd have to use generalized, broad-spectrum tunes that would lack precision, and accuracy was very important now. Kirk had some obscure but very strong inhibition against tears, and this was no time to deal with that problem, so very few pain-release channels remained. The help she could offer was limited: find some other safe release or damp the pain long enough to let him sleep, or both. Pain killers, she thought. Hard booze? Where? He can't stand our Firewater, and everything else is gone. Pipeweed? Not with his cough. Something from Jean, or Sickbay? ...No. Mood-breaking to get up and go to the intercom, and he's fragile right now. If only Quanna were here.... No, don't think about that. Only him. Sparks, keep holding him. I'll keep playing. Change, sooner or later....

Sparks wrapped both massive arms around Kirk and began to rock him, very gently, in rhythm with the music. Rock-a-bye baby, Kirk thought. Goodbye, little Jim or Sam or George, or maybe Elizabeth.... Gone. No children for me. Goodbye all hope.... The hollowness in him cracked like an eggshell, and oozed out blinding pain. Under the force of it he groaned and quivered like a victim on the rack. Sparks hugged tighter. Kirk raised his hands to his head, as if to hold it together. No! No! he yelled at himself as the pain closed around his throat. Don't break! For God's sake don't cry, don't let go, or you'll lose everything, tell everything, and they'll know....

"Jim," Roantree whispered, putting aside her 12-string. "Jim, for the Mother's sake...."

She can feel it! With the last shred of his strength, Kirk pushed all words and pictures away and held his mind blank, featureless, empty, save for one long soundless scream. He began to shake.

"Jim, let go! Let it go, or it'll kill you!"

The shaking grew worse. He tried to take a deep breath, and choked in the middle. His whole body quivered violently, out of control, a self-contained earthquake. He wondered if his scarred brain was performing one last treachery, one that would kill him this time, and he wasn't sure if he feared that or welcomed it. Why not? A revelation flamed above the rattling storm of pain and loss and terror. Why not die? I got here by one betrayal, and I'll get out of it by another.... I can't face that again!

"Stretch him out, quick!"

Hands pulled him, pressed him against a yielding surface, tugged his shirt away, ground into his arms and neck and shoulders. Live weight pinned his thighs. One pair of hands held his wrists, another kneaded muscles up and down his back. For long moments the pressure of those broad hands warred with the terrible shaking, battled and slowly won. The shuddering faded away, leaving him limp and exhausted on the bed, breathing in great dry sobs. Sparks' hands still worked carefully up and down his body, reducing him to a skiful of warm water. He didn't attempt to think.

"So that's what it takes...." murmured Roantree, letting go of his wrists. "You poor bastard, your pride's going to kill you someday." She ran gentle fingers through his sweat-soaked hair. "I don't know what your customs are, or where you got that taboo, but it's doing you no good. You know, where we come from, old legend says that the inability to cry is a sign of having made a pact with the devil." Bailey mentioned it. For your own sake, disprove her....

"...let go," Kirk whispered. "Don't touch me. Don't want you...to feel this...." Link stronger when we touch. Barriers down. She could find out.... Don't think.

"All right," said Roantree, pulling her hands away. I made him feel my grief, but he doesn't want to do that to me...a better man than I thought. And to think that they doubted him! I'm sorry, Jim.... "Can you sleep now, do you think?"

"Yes." ...sleep forever....

"Do you want us to stay here with you?"

"No. I'll be all right." Go away. Leave me alone.

"Good night, then. Call us if you need anything."

The Anarchists obligingly got up and left, their exit bracketed by the sounds of the door. Kirk sagged on his pillow and fell asleep just as he was, thinking last bitter thoughts of betrayal and punishment and wondering if the loss of the baby weren't some form of judgment in advance for what he was going to do to Quanna and Jenneth and their people.

Sleep plunged him into stark dream. He was kneeling on a rug worked with a Romulan war-bird design but in the hot sullen-red sunlight of Vulcan. Before him, in the white draped uniform of an Empire scientist, knelt someone holding a sword - the short ritual sword of Steel Passage, the Romulan blade of mercy - aimed straight at the middle of his ruined body. He knew very well why he was here; he had dragged himself all the way home, done his duty and now he sought that rest which he couldn't give himself, sought it at the hand of one who loved him. Even Romulans love their children.... He looked up into his beloved executioner's tear-streaming eyes, and saw that the face was not Sarek's but Spock's. The long arm lunged. The sword struck deep; but there was no pain - only a solid impact that flashed through him from head to foot, and the echoes of it were sweet. Spock...? Silence followed, and he slept.

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Project Tape R-229, Roantree recording:

TOMORROW WE REACH THE WORLD OF THE GUARDIAN OF FOREVER. FOR THE FIRST TIME IN MONTHS I'VE HAD TIME TO STOP AND REALIZE WHAT A MOMENTOUS THING IT IS THAT WE'RE DOING. EVERYONE'S QUIET AND SUBDUED, NOTICEABLY MORE THAN USUAL - WHICH IS SAYING SOMETHING, CONSIDERING SCOTTY'S USUAL APATHY. BETWEEN HIS HALF-ABSENCE AND JIM'S BAD HEALTH I'M PRETTY MUCH IN CHARGE OF THE BRIDGE THESE DAYS.

TO CHANNEL THE GROWING NERVOUSNESS, WE HAD A BRIEF DEPARTURE-EVE CEREMONY IN REC ROOM #4. SO MANY OF JIM'S PEOPLE SHOWED UP THAT WE WERE BADLY CRAMPED FOR SPACE. SPARKS AND JEAN AND BAILEY AND QUANNA INVOKED THE GODS AND MADE THE PRAYERS FOR VICTORY, AND I SACRIFICED THE LABORATORY-CHICKEN, AND THERE WERE SO MANY PEOPLE PRESENT THAT NOBODY GOT MORE THAN A SMALL RITUAL BITE OF THE BIRD. WELL, THE ENTRAILS LOOKED PROMISING, AND ALL THE BLOOD AND BONES AND FEATHERS BURNED NEATLY.

I STAYED FOR THE PARTY AFTERWARDS - USED UP NEARLY ALL OF MY PIPE-WEED - BUT QUANNA AND JIM LEFT EARLY, AS USUAL. I GUESS HE'S SAVING HIS STRENGTH FOR TOMORROW. HOPE SO, ANYWAY. HE DOESN'T LOOK GOOD.

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Kirk dropped into the bed with a grateful sigh, moving only enough to make room for Quannechota. She felt wonderfully cool and solid against him; he guessed that he was running a fever again and reached for his depleted bottle of aspirins. She had the water ready for him by the time he'd shaken out the pills.

"It is unusual for the Wheezes to last this long," she began carefully. "Should you not go to the doctors for something more effective than willow-extract? You need something more, Love; you are very thin and pale, and there are hectic-spots on your cheeks.

"No," he answered as usual. "It'll clear up by itself in time, and it isn't too bad." The fleeting idea of running into M'Benga again made his hand twitch toward a fist, as usual. "Besides, this time tomorrow we'll be back in our own universe...I mean the real one...I mean.... Well, it'll be set right, and we'll be home. Anything really wrong, they can cure there. With luck, Bones will be there waiting for us...and Spock."

Quanna frowned slightly, suspecting that these were only day-dreams and wrapped her arms a little tighter around him. All the signs - so many signs, subtle and obvious - gave sad promise that time was short. The omens from the sacrificial bird had promised success but hinted strongly at death. Judas Pennington, of course, but him also? Oh Love, time is short! "Always at my back I hear Time's winged chariot...." She tracked

small kisses along his sharp collarbones and wished he had enough strength to mate with her, which would also be good luck for the eve of departure, but he hadn't been able to do that in several days. She drew one hand regretfully down his body, dismayed at how easy it was to count his ribs.

Kirk caught her hand and pulled it up to his face and carefully kissed each finger. "I just thought of something," he murmured, turning his bright eye on her. "On Earth...my Earth, I mean...genetic experimentation has been outlawed since the Eugenics Wars, but on other worlds it's different. The Vulcan Science Academy has been working on problems like...like this...Quanna, we might yet be able to have children. It's not impossible. McCoy might know...." He broke off in another wearing round of coughing.

Quanna handed him the water again, taking care that her hands didn't shake. It was hard to have hope raised again. "Vulcan Science Academy," she repeated to herself. Remember that. Vulcan, Vulcan....

The coughing didn't stop. It knocked him flat on the bed, shook him from end to end, gave him no time to gulp down any water. He could barely catch his breath between spasms. Quanna rolled him on his side and rummelled his back. That didn't help either. She bent over him, wondering what else she could do and saw that there was blood on his mouth.

"I must call a doctor," she said, reaching for the intercom. Kirk shook his head frantically, still coughing. "Not M'Benga," she explained. "I mean Jean Battre-le-Diable."

"...and Scotty," Kirk gasped. "Get Scotty!"

Quannechota nodded agreement and punched open the intercom. Exactly 3.5 minutes later, Jean Battre-le-Diable came belting through the door with Scotty two paces behind him. Quanna climbed off the bed and took Scotty aside. The little biologist sat down beside Kirk, felt his forehead, looked at his eyes, listened to his chest, and turned noticeably pale himself.

"Jesu-Marie, I've never seen anything like it," he muttered, rummaging in his medicine bag. "And how in les noms des dieux did he get it? Ah, here. Stop that sacré cough...."

He pulled out a small ceramic bowl, a piece of charcoal and a lump of something brown and gummy; he lit the charcoal, dropped it into the bowl, and dropped the brown lump on top of it. Next, he blew hard on the coal, raising a cloud of thick yellowish smoke, held the bowl under Kirk's chin and fanned the smoke at him. Kirk, understanding none of this, turned his face away from the smoke and kept coughing.

"Whot the hell are ye doin'?" Scott demanded, frightened. A quiet glare from Quannechota silenced him.

"Damn!" snapped Jean, "Lie still, idiote! I'm trying to save you!" He flipped the blankets over Kirk's head and stuffed the smoking bowl under them with him. Kirk gagged on the smoke but had no choice except to breathe it. As the seconds ticked past, his coughing slackened and finally stopped. The little biologist cautiously pulled away the blankets to reveal Kirk lying still on the pillow, breathing easily, his eye vague and glassy. There was more blood on the sheet.

Battre-le-Diable wordlessly shook his head at that, put the little bowl aside, felt around in his bag and came up with a box of antique-fashion glass slides. He took out two of the microscope slides, carefully scraped some of the ominous blood onto one, and covered it with the other. "I'll go look at this under a scope," he said, wrapping the slides in smooth paper. He then pulled out a Y-shaped contraption of tubes, placed the ends of the two upright forks in his ears and held the knobbed end of the bottom tube to Kirk's chest. He listened to Kirk's breathing for several minutes while his eyes grew big and round. "'Glurg, slush, attle,'" he muttered. "Fleuves de merde, I've never heard anything like it. It's the Wheezes multiplied thousandfold...." He took off the listening device and tapped it against his hand, glanced at the others, then back to Kirk.

"Big Jim," he sighed, "I've never seen the like. All I can tell at this point is that it seems to be the Wheezes, but on a grand scale. It appears that what is no more than a mild annoyance to us has turned cruelly malignant in you. It's very advanced. At the rate it's going...." He glanced again at the others.



"I hope to tous les dieux that there's a cure for it in your universe. Jim, if your people can't cure you, you have less than a month to live - maybe only two weeks."

"No..." Scott whispered, turning as pale as Kirk.

Quannechota shut her eyes and remembered the warning of the omens.

"A month," Kirk considered. "Doesn't matter, just so long as...I can get through...the Guardian tomorrow. Help me do that, Jean. I have to.

"Tres bien," sighed Battre-le-Diable. He searched his bag once more and came up with more of the gummy brown stuff and a handful of sinister-looking herbs. "I don't have time to process these down," he said. "Dissolve this lump in alcohol to make a cough-syrup, or smoke it straight. You don't have a pipe, do you? Well, use Quanna's Calumet. Be careful; it makes one sleepy and causes visions."

"Whot is yon stuff?" Scott insisted.

"Straight opium," said the Anarchist. "There isn't time to process the codeine fraction out of it, but it'll do well enough as is. Now these..." He pointed to the mixed herbs. "...combine to make a fairly good stimulant. Grind them up and boil them into tea. There's enough here to make about a pint; drink half a cupful about 20 minutes before you'll need to be wide awake. Until then, all I can suggest is get plenty of rest, keep warm, try to eat, and drink as much water as you can comfortably hold. Keep the air dry. Also, if you have a good source of ultra-violet radiation around here, try soaking in the rays as much as is safe... and protect your eye, of course. It may help a little. There's nothing else I can do for you. I'm sorry."

"That's all right," Kirk replied, thinking hard. "Come here, all of you." He smiled as Scott and Quanna came forward. "Listen, I want you to keep this quiet, understand? No one's to know about it but the four of us, not until tomorrow's business is over."

"But Captain, the senior officers'll hafta know!" Scott yelled. "'Tis in the reg...uh, the regular custom. Och, ye know wha' I mean. I've got ta tell 'em."

"All right, all right, the senior officers then. Nobody else."

"Except me," said a voice beyond the screen. The figure stepped out into the light, revealing an all-too-well-known face.

Jenneth. Of course. "Yes, you too," Kirk sighed. "No one else. Promise me."

They promised: Scott reluctantly, the Anarchists solemnly. Jean Battre-le-Diable closed up his bag, took his slides and went away. There was an awkward moment, and then Quannechota scooped up the medicines and went out with Roantree in tow.

Scott slowly went up to the bed and sat down and took one of Kirk's hands between his own. For awhile he did nothing but hold that hand, noting how very thin it was and wondering why he hadn't seen the trouble earlier. I'm a fool in all but engines, he thought. I've no business being in command. "Jim, I'm sorry," he said. "I should ha' seen.... Och, I've made such a wretched mess o' things!"

"...You?" Kirk puzzled.

"Aye, me! If I hadna been such a domned incompetent at bein' Captain, if I'd had more sense than ta haul ye back onto the bridge, makin' ye work ma job as well as yer own, runnin' yer health doon...."

"Scotty, Scotty, I wanted to! It was my own damned fault.... Besides, we don't know that it would have made any difference to the disease. We don't know when or where or how I got it...or why it's only me that's affected. You know, that little Anarchist doctor is the only one on the ship who seems to know anything about it...and he admitted that he can't help. It's nobody's fault. There's nothing...anyone here...can do about it...."

"I canna keep from thinkin' thot I've done miserably, in command an' in friendship...." The burly engineer turned his face away for a moment and rubbed his forearm across his eyes.

"Scotty...." Kirk squeezed his hand. "You crazy, hard-drinking, bull-headed genius of an Engineer.... Look, we got here, didn't we? ...Sure, we're worn and torn and on our last legs...but we got here. Just one more thing...one little thing to do, and it's over. It'll all be set right. We're almost home, Scotty. This time tomorrow...we'll look back on all this...as a bad dream."

"Aye, a nightmare," Scott agreed. "Captain, promise me one thing."

"Name it."

"When ye beam doon ta the Guardian tomorra, leave me here on the ship."

"All right, but why?"

"When time changes, the way the Guardian works.... Weel, for anyone ootside the immediate range, 'tis as if things had always been, uh, as they will be. 'Twill a' be as if naethin' had happened, an' I'll remember none o' this, an' thot's how I want it. Lord, but I want ta forget!"

"I understand. Consider it done, Scotty. You'll stay at the con while I beam down with the security detail...and the Anarchists."

"What?! Ye plan ta take 'em with ye?"

"They're determined to go. Can you think of any way to stop them?"

"Uh...." Scott frowned and thought for a long while, and then his shoulders sagged, and he shook his head. "The domned lawless bastards," he sighed. "They're in the habit o' gettin' their own way."

Not for long, Kirk thought, this time with pity. "So, they go and you stay. We'll stop Pennington and..." Now that he thought of it, pictured it carefully, there was another problem. What if we run into the rest? Spock, Bones, me...the earlier me.... How will that earlier me react? He tried to imagine how his earlier self would take to seeing the Anarchists - not to mention himself - stopping Pennington "by any means necessary." The thought was unexpectedly frightening and hard to bring into clear focus, as if he could no longer understand his earlier self. He backed away from that and grabbed at a passing idea. "Scotty, pull the log tapes, all of them, right back to the beginning of that last mission and pack them all in a carrying case. If there's a chance we can meet our earlier selves, I want to give the tapes to them. Somehow, I'll make them understand...." ...what's happening to me.

"Aye, O' course!" Scott pounced on the idea. "An' more: a' the records from the Science labs, the Anthro-pology teams, Engineerin' an'...Captain, can I include me own personal log too?"

"Sure and mine, and...Hell, why not everybody's? Information and personal accounts from the whole crew... it'll make a big package, but not too much for me to carry...." My personal logs, all these months? I'd sound like a raving lunatic! Bones would.... No, he'd understand. So would Spock. They'll know what to do. Tell them everything. No more lies...I'm sick of lying....

"Aye, aye, I'll do it," Scott enthused. "I'll go tell the crew right away." He started to get up, but paused a moment over the prospect of leaving Kirk alone in this condition. The doors whooshed open as someone came in, solving the dilemma for him. Scott grinned, patted Kirk's shoulder and left.

Kirk relaxed and let his thoughts drift, lulled by the soft, painless, dreamy effect of the Anarchist cough-medicine. This time tomorrow.... the words echoed in his mind, taking on a rhythm and a tune: "This time tomorrow, reckon where I'll be...." He couldn't think of the next line.

Someone came in and sat beside him. A tricorder warbled. He turned to see what was happening and saw Christine Chapel pointing a tricorder at him. "What're you doing here?" he mumbled.

"Checking to see if it was true," Christine replied, putting down the tricorder. "I'm afraid it is. Captain, do you know what you've got?"

"Jean told me. He was supposed to keep it quiet. How did you...."

"I bullied the story out of him. I caught him working on the slides, and when I asked what he was studying, he acted guilty, which tipped me off. The Anarchists aren't very good at deliberate lying.... Captain, are you in pain?"

"No, no, just a twinge. Do we have a cure for this?"

"Sir, I'm not yet certain what it is. I don't think I've ever seen that particular bacillus before, though I could swear some of its features are familiar.... Given some time I could probably identify it and determine the cure, but not by tomorrow morning. I was coming here to ask you about taking the Sickbay and Biolab tapes with you, to give to Dr. McCoy if you see him, and then I ran into Mr. Scott."

"Good. Make up the tapes tonight, Chris. Don't worry about me. But promise me this much: don't tell anyone else about my health. Bad for morale...."

"I won't, Sir. Dr. Battre-le-Diable insisted on swearing me to silence. But, Captain, are you sure you'll be able to...to do what needs doing tomorrow? We don't know how strenuous it will be."

"I'll manage. Jean gave me some home-brewed cough-medicine and some kind of stimulant. Did he mention that?"

"Yes, Sir. I got that out of him too, and the ingredients. Simply amazing. Crude herbal remedies, practically out of the Stone Age, but I must admit they're effective." She sighed. "It's ironic, how they look up to us as Masters of Science, heaven-sent prophets of their odd religion, bearers of marvelous knowledge... and yet we depend on them for so much. Us with our under-powered ship and our insufficient medicine and our battle-shocked psyches.... They really are stronger than we are."

So you've noticed it too! Kirk thought, watching her turn her attention to her tricorder readings. For a moment, in that light, it was as if he were seeing her for the first time. She was worn and thin and weary, as much as any of his people, but as clear-headed and thoughtful and super-efficient as ever. It occurred to him that Christine Chapel was one of the smartest, sanest, strongest of his crew, and he'd never realized it before. That was incredible. She was worth any man's admiration, trust, even love. Why had Spock never seen and acknowledged it?

"You know, Captain," she smiled at him, "when I was a little girl I used to love adventure stories. I read every book I could find, saw every tape I could catch about famous explorations or disasters or survival epics. I'm not sure how that got me into Biology and Medicine, but it was one of the things that led me into Starfleet. Where else could a girl go to find adventure these days? Well, I found enough adventure to satisfy anybody's Romanticism - got to be something of a nonchalant veteran, even. I was beginning to think that nothing could surprise me anymore...and then this happened." She spread her hands. "This - the time-journey, the disaster, the settlement, and now this voyage - this tops any saga I ever heard of. It would make a tale worth telling for the rest of my life: something to impress my grandchildren, assure me free drinks anywhere in space, give me a sure place in history even if I never did anything else. What a pity I won't be able to tell it!"

"Won't be...Why? Why not?"

"I won't remember it. I'm staying on the ship tomorrow, and when time changes back, I'll be outside the time-vortex. For me, this will never have happened. The best I can do is send a letter to myself and give it to you to take through the Guardian. It won't be quite the same as actual memories. Perhaps it's better so, but I still feel robbed in advance."

"I understand, Chris. All I can suggest is make that letter very thorough. You've got all night to compose it."

"I'll do my best, Captain." She smiled again, stood up, took the tricorder and walked away. The room seemed much bigger and emptier after she'd gone.

He didn't have long to think about that last insight; in a few minutes the doors sang open again, and Chekov and Sulu came in. Sulu was carrying a bunch of oddly-assorted flowers, doubtless the latest crop of his favorite hobby, and Chekov was holding a multi-colored, convoluted, exotically awful-looking glass vase. Traditional gifts for invalids.... He smiled at them.

"Er, Captain, Mr. Scott told us you weren't feeling well." Sulu shyly offered the flowers. "We thought maybe you'd like these. They just bloomed today."

"An dis is a pis of chenuine Russian plestic-art," Chekov followed, lovingly setting the amorphous vase on the bed-shelf. "It doesn't lik."

Kirk could think of a few rejoinders to that, but all of them were dirty, and he didn't think the Navigation Twins would react well to that. Instead he smiled again and, remembering that one of the compensations offered to invalids was that one didn't have to conduct a conversation if he didn't feel like it, he asked them how they were getting along.

"Oh, very good, Sir," Sulu took up. "I've finally managed to teach Pavel the rudiments of fencing."

"Nyeh, I only let you win to impress dot pretty Enairchist girl who wass watching. You know, de one wit' de big...."

Here we go again, Kirk thought, grinning. He leaned back and floated on a smoke-cloud of comfortable drowsiness, watching the two of them from a vague distance. The dull-gold of their shirts seemed very bright, and the light flashed from their shirt insigniae. Colors too bright...I've been here before. Drugged. Visions.... Any revelations this time?

He watched and waited, and in time he began to notice how very big and dark their black shirt-collars seemed. He'd never thought about it before, but those collars resembled yokes, or slave-rings. Strange, it never looked like that against a blue shirt...a little, not so much, against red...gold, most of all. Why is that? Gold...sun-color, target center, command. He felt a sudden wave of aching pity for the two of them, so young, barely more than boys, already draped in that fatal gold. Golden fleece for a sacrificial lamb! Gold weighs so heavy.... Oh, you don't know! If you don't escape, that weight will fall on you!

"Captain, is something wrong?" Sulu was the first to notice.

"Keptain?" Chekov echoed.

"Take off those shirts!" Kirk whispered, distracted. "Take off that crushing gold and wear black, like the Anarchists, or it'll kill you. Those braids on your wrists - they're chains! They'll chain you to the altar, hold you down under the knife, crush you, strangle you... My God, look what they've done to me!"

"Keptain, pliz, calm yourself," Chekov wailed. "Eferyt'ings all right, rilly it is!"

"...the chains on you...Nobody should have that kind of burden, that kind of power.... It can grind you to nothing."

"Yes, Sir, I know," said Sulu, very quietly. "I've seen it."

"You...understand?" Kirk took a long look at his Helmsman, wondering if that could be true, remembering all the times he'd beamed down and left Sulu in command. "I think you do, a little. Oh, Sulu, it gets worse! Believe me, it does. It gets worse with every circle of braid. Get out while you can, don't try for any more, unless you're damned sure you can stand up under it...."

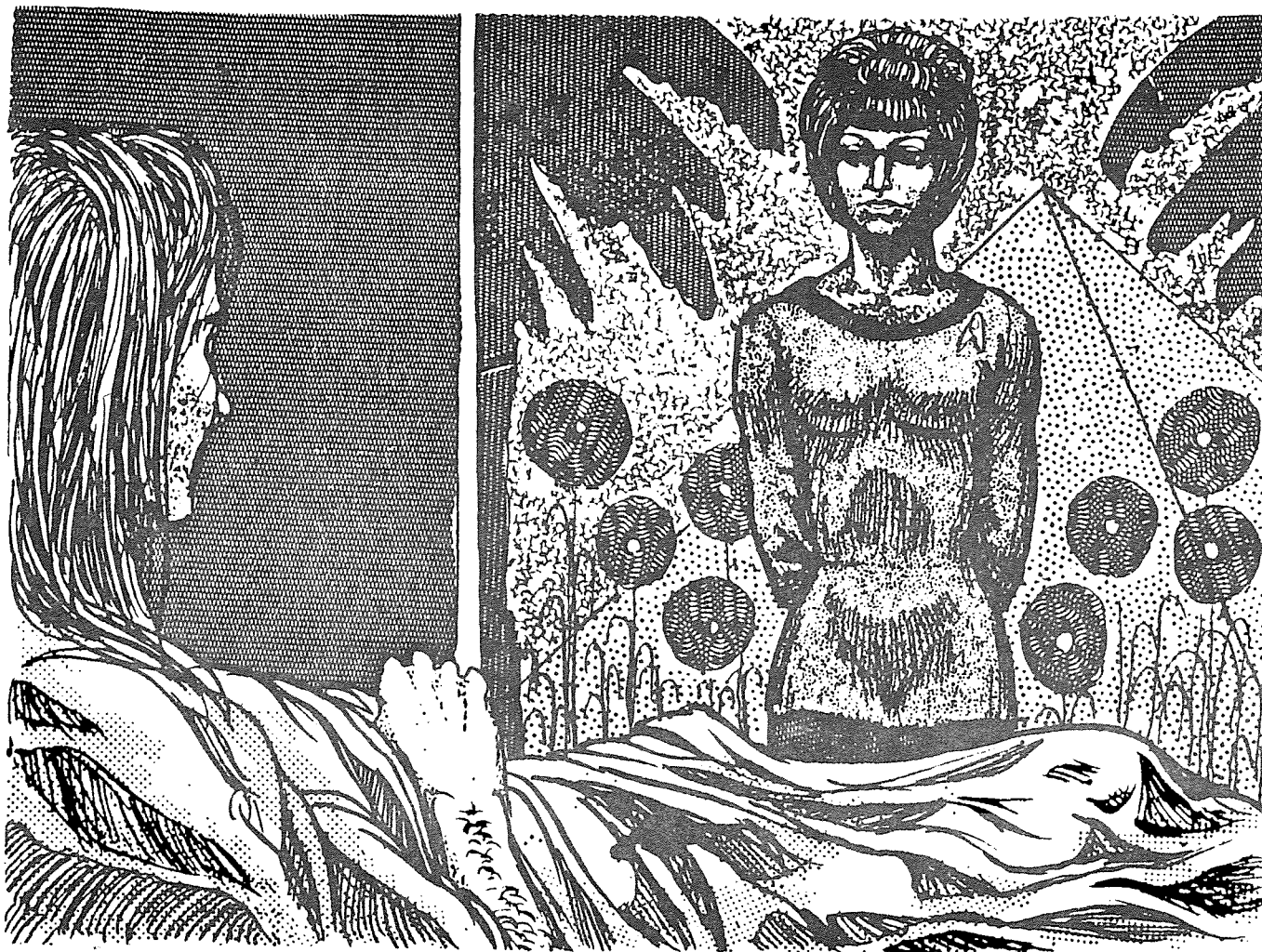
"Yes, Captain. I've thought a lot about it in the past year. If it were just for myself I'd take my ratings and get the hell out of Starfleet - maybe get a job in a nice, safe passenger liner somewhere. I don't need the pressure. But...." He paused a moment, picking the right words. "It's the job, Sir. The job seems to need me. So I'll stick it out a little while longer."

"...Good luck, then. I know how much you'll need it. Good luck, Sulu...." The drowsiness tugged insistently, and he felt himself slipping away with it. "...and take care of Chekov for me...." He let go and drifted off on the warm tide, vaguely hearing Sulu and Chekov get up and trudge out. Chekov seemed to be hiccupping terribly.

Time passed, carrying Kirk just above sleep on a quiet, painless tide. He was distantly aware of the door opening and closing, people tiptoeing in and out, the mixed scent of the nearby flowers, none of it important enough to really notice. Tomorrow was the important thing, and tomorrow was a long way off, and there was time now just to rest. He was infinitely grateful for that.

Once he opened his eyes and saw a woman standing near him. In the dim light she seemed to be painted on the air, in tones of red and black and shadow. It took him a moment to focus on her.

"...Uhura?"



"Yes, Captain." She moved a little closer. "How are you feeling?"

"Feeling no pain." He smiled, watching her. She was beautiful in this soft light, surely one of the most beautiful women ever born, beautiful in a timeless fashion that did not change with fashion, and she could have been as admired beside the new-made pyramids as on a starship's bridge. He imagined her surrounded by palm trees, mixed with the weird tall flowers of Argelius, and they complimented her perfectly. "Lovely..." he whispered. "Queen of Sheba..."

Uhura blinked, remembering that he used to call her that, long months ago. "Captain," she couldn't help saying, "I did say 'someday,' but you gave me no time." Stop that! This isn't what I meant to say...

"Time..." "World enough, and time..." "Tomorrow I'll give you all the time in the galaxy. Tomorrow..."

"Yes." Is he delirious, or does that mean something? He's still a married man...of sorts. And after time changes? Who knows? "You mean, I'll just have to wait and see how the Wheel of Fortune spins? As you like, Captain. You're making a gambler of me."

"No bigger gambler than I am. This wheel's as big as the whole galaxy...where she stops, nobody knows. Wish me luck for tomorrow." Good luck to you, too, Queen of Sheba. And Sulu. He gave her a long fond look. She'd hurt him not too long ago, but that didn't matter now. He felt he could forgive anybody for anything, and everybody for everything: desertion, betrayal, countless rejections - all forgiven. He wondered if this expansive mood was the result of the cough-medicine, his recent death-sentence, or the infinite promise of tomorrow. Probably the last, he decided. "I'll do it right, for all time's sake."

For old time's sake? Uhura thought. Oh, I can't stand this! "Good luck, Captain, for both of us," she said and got up and left quickly.

Kirk listened to the door close behind her, leaving the room silent again. Against that silence he distinctly heard someone chuckle, and then the creak of a chair. A shadow fell across the screen. Before the figure behind it came into view, he knew who it was. Jenneth. His forgiving mood thinned a little.

"Enjoying your Deathbed Scene, Camille?" she asked knowingly.

Kirk was first shocked, then indignant, then thoughtful over the last hour - and he wound up chuckling. "Just for that," he said, pointing an admonishing finger at her, "you don't get to be in it."

"I'll never survive the disappointment," she laughed. "But seriously, Jim, do you think you'll be able to walk tomorrow, or will we have to carry you?"

"You won't have to carry me!"

"Good, but in your condition I don't think you should tote much gear. What do you absolutely have to take with you?"

"Hmmm... Just the tapes. There'll be quite a lot of them."

"No coat? Bedroll? Camping gear? Shotgun? We may be in Chicago for several days."

"True... Tell Scotty I'll need one standard survival kit."

"Check. I'll get it myself when I leave here, which should be...." She glanced at the door, then shrugged. "Well, whenever Quanna finishes making up your medicine."

"Heh, heh! 'Eye of newt, tongue of dog'...."

"Not quite that bad; it only looks that way." She reached into her belt-pouch and pulled out a group of standard tapes held in a repeat-play cradle. "Sparks finally found out how to set a group of tapes on continuous replay, and he gave me a bunch of them. Did you know that this is our wedding anniversary?"

"Huh? No. Well, congratulations." I didn't even know you people HAD anniversaries! "I wish you'd told me before."

"Didn't think of it. Sorry. Mind if I play some of the tapes while we're waiting for Quanna?"

"No, go right ahead." As if I could stop you, music-junkie.

As he watched her walk over to his desk-terminal and insert the tapes, another memory strolled through his head, a memory that he knew was hers. He saw a big front room of an old-fashioned farmhouse packed full of people. They were obviously her people and not his: hard-muscled, rough-handed, wearing coarse denim and leather and homespun, shaggy and headbanded, scarred and tattooed, garish and exuberant and enjoying themselves hugely. Most of them were lined up in reel-rows, though a few stood clustered in a corner.

One of those in the corner was the dance-caller, wearing a gorgeously embroidered shirt, red-faced with shouting directions, grinning from ear to ear. Dad, Dad!! ...No, hers. It was different here... And there was his mother, sitting among the musicians, playing a banjo, smiling, her long hair come undone and drifting across the strings to add soft tones to the low notes. My mother never played anything. Neither did Sam.... Yes, there was Sam, squeezing some of the damnest sounds he'd ever hear out of an old-fashioned harmonica. He could feel the sheer joy and closeness and vitality pulsing out of the music and reverberating from the walls. My family was never like that.... Jenneth, you never did get around to telling me about your world, your life, your family.... I really want to know.

But the music that filled his ears could never have come from those simple instruments; there were the smooth wails and weird voice-like tones of the 'rock-steel' school, music that hadn't been made in this uni-

verse since the Fall of Science. The tapes, he realized, sliding back to here-and-now. The music was quiet and eerie and intriguing, and he could feel a purr of enjoyment coming from Jenneth as she following the interweaving progressions. Eventually, words fell into pattern.

This is the end, beautiful friend, the end:
Of our elaborate plans, the end:
Of everything that stands, the end.
Can you see how it will be?
So limitless and free,
Desperately in need of some stranger's hand
In a desperate land.

Roantree frowned and flicked the tape over to something else, a light wordless dance-tune. "Avert the women," she muttered, getting up to come over to the bed. She sat down beside Kirk, pulled out a corn cob pipe and stuffed it full - kinnickinnic this time, not pipeweed; she still had plenty to do tonight.

"... 'limitless'..." Kirk's attention snagged on the word. "We'll be home, and you'll see if for yourself. Mankind among the stars...so many, many worlds...so beautiful...."

"'So beautiful, so various, so new,'" Roantree echoed, then stopped, remembering where the rest of that poem went. Damned sense of foreboding, everywhere. What's the matter with me? Jitters? No doubt. Change the subject. "You know, Jim, it hasn't been exactly dull on our Earth. I got a taste for adventure at an early age, and I must say I've had a few.... Like the time we were bringing an ore-boat down the lake and the fog rolled in, so that we had to hug the shoreline to find our way. Now there were raiders from Minnesota along that coast, and wouldn't you know it, a boatload of those Vikings came hunting after us in the fog. We couldn't outrun or outfight them, only had a half an hour's lead. So we outfoxed them. Know how? A big fat bluff. We nudged her aground, heeled over as far as was safe but still looked convincing. We draped our bodies artistically around the deck, spilled some meat to attract drows, and then we ran up the plague flag. When the Vikings came up, we looked like the ghastliest plague-struck wreck you ever saw. It worked! Heh, heh! Saved by the plague flag!"

Oops. Shouldn't remind him of that.

"...And there are plenty of fascinating places on our Earth. The rich trade-cities of Wheatland and the Erie shore, or Old Chinatown, where I learned to eat with chopsticks or the Dead Plain! Brr! It's something you have to see to believe. It's way to the west, where they used a few nuclear bombs in the last great war, and the radiation level is so high there, even after nearly three centuries, that you have to wear thick lead armor to cross it alive. The dead lie all over it - people and animals and plants - killed by the radiation and preserved by it. Not even bacteria or viruses can survive there, and the bodies of creatures centuries dead look as if they'd died less than an hour ago...." She hitched her shoulders forward and shivered. "When the Romulan conquerors come marching through there, I wish them the joy of what they find.... Damn, I'm not sounding very cheerful, am I? I'm sorry." She reached over and squeezed his arm.

"It's all right. Tell me more. Tell me about my...your family, your brother, for example...."

"Sam?" Jenneth looked away. "That's a good story, but it ends badly. He was the Good Kid in the family, and everybody loved him. I guess that made him something of an idealist. He went around being good and kind and noble all the time, always having a good word to say for everyone, never quite believing that there was really evil in the world...."

"So goody-goody that at times you couldn't stand him," Kirk muttered.

"Right," Jenneth laughed. "Especially when I'd just gotten a licking for something that he'd gotten clean out of. But that didn't happen very often, and usually we were as close as two fingers on the same hand."

"Even after you grew up?"

"For awhile," Jenneth hurried on. "He was in Biology research, really never cared for the space program, and he got tired of High Harbor. He had a preaching-streak in him somewhere, and he figured he could spread the acceptance of Science if he went elsewhere and showed people new medical and farming techniques. He eventually wound up in Denver, where he said the 'climate' was right. He settled down with a local girl named Goldie and had a son and.... For awhile it looked as if it would work. He founded a school for veterinary and farming methods, even had some research labs going, had people coming around to the idea of rediscovering advanced Biology. It began to look as if we might even ally.... And then the axe fell. One day we got word by carrier-pigeon telling that Denver was a plague-city. We sent out an expedition. I managed to get myself and Quanna in it, and we rode like hell for the Colorado country. Well, we got there in time to save a lot of the inhabitants, but not Sam or his family...." Roantree gave a long quiet sigh. "It turned out to be a mutated form of rabies, comparatively easy to cure, but very fast-spreading. We found out what the vector was when Quanna was bitten by a rabid dog. She was also the first person we tried the antidote on. It was rough - she had reactions to it for days - but it worked. The medical staff went around injecting all the victims, and I took out a party of guards and we shot every dog we could find. To this day, I don't think you could find any dogs within fifty miles of Denver."

"In my case," Kirk whispered, "it was a world called Deneva."

"A whole world?" Jenneth shook her head. "No, before this I've never had adventures of that magnitude. I guess I've lived a pretty dull life by your standards, tied to one world and not much of that...limited, poor... You know, Jim...." Her eyes wandered around the cabin, looking almost wistful, "I've never stood beside an ocean, never eaten a pineapple, never known a winter when I wasn't hungry and cold... Nor have any of us. We can hardly wait to see that new universe of yours, Jim." She tapped out her pipe.

Kirk couldn't think of anything to say.

The doors opened and Quannechota came in, holding two tightly-capped bottles and a clear-plastic pouch of the remaining brown gum. She set the assorted medicines on the bed-shelf, studied Kirk for a moment, then turned to glance at Roantree. Their eyes met and caught, and they exchanged a long quiet look, as if they would have said much. Kirk fought down a desperate ache of jealousy, angry that he still reacted like that after all this time. No damned right to feel this way, he kicked himself. She's mine now, and they only want to wish each other well... Nonetheless, when Jenneth put her hands on Quanna's shoulders and drew her close, he had to turn his face away and bite his lip to endure it at all.

The farewell was brief. Roantree pulled away, went and reclaimed her tape-packet, and left. Quanna wordlessly sat down on the bed, measured out a spoonful of the cough-medicine and offered it to Kirk. He made a face over the taste of the stuff.

"We had no time to develop a decent flavoring for it," she apologized. "Perhaps it is just as well. The medicine is addictive, and it is best to discourage unnecessary use." She capped the bottle and put it away.

"Ummhmmmm...." Kirk began to forget the taste, and his earlier upset, as the drowsiness rolled back over his mind. He smiled sleepily, watching Quanna undress and slide into bed beside him. Her body felt wonderfully warm and supple and smooth, and he managed to drag his drugged-heavy arms around her and bury his face in her thick hair before sleep claimed him utterly.

Out of oblivion a clear dream surfaced. He was alone on the Enterprise, a disembodied ghost drifting through the empty corridors, hounded by frantic loneliness and a leaden sense of dread. He fled through the empty ship, coming at last to the bridge, certain that all answers were there. The first thing he saw was the viewscreen, fixed on the turning Earth below. He knew, without looking at the sensor board, that this was an alien Earth. It could only be the backward, unchanged Earth he had seen for so many empty days and weeks and months before the Anarchists came. He was back there, in the hopeless desolation and guilt and loneliness of those first months, lost and despised and utterly alone.

Then he saw himself sitting in the command chair. He saw it from the side, from somewhere near Spock's station, and the sight of that unmoving body and the terrible emptiness of the tear-tracked, unscarred, unsee-



ing face frightened him almost to panic. He was certain that he had to get back into that body or dissolve completely, like mist blown away by a hard wind. He flung himself at the motionless flesh, pressed against it, clawed at it, hammered at it as on a locked door, and suddenly fell through and found himself inside. For several moments he did nothing but sit still and revel in the feel of breathing and heartbeat and the solidity of the surrounding chair; and then he noticed something odd, a heavy tugging on his chest, something that shouldn't properly be there. He looked down and saw, instead of the usual flat surface, the undeniable swelling of full breasts.

No, he begged the silent Fates, No, please, not that! Slowly, holding his breath, he raised his hands and looked at the backs of them. The left was marked with a crescent-moon scar and the right with a sunburst tattoo.

At that point he started screaming. He howled himself up from sleep, waking in his own bed, in his own cabin, with Quanna close and concerned about him. Despite the still heavy grip of cough-medicine, despite Quannechota's calm reassurance, despite knowing firmly when and where and who he was, it was a long time before he could sleep again.

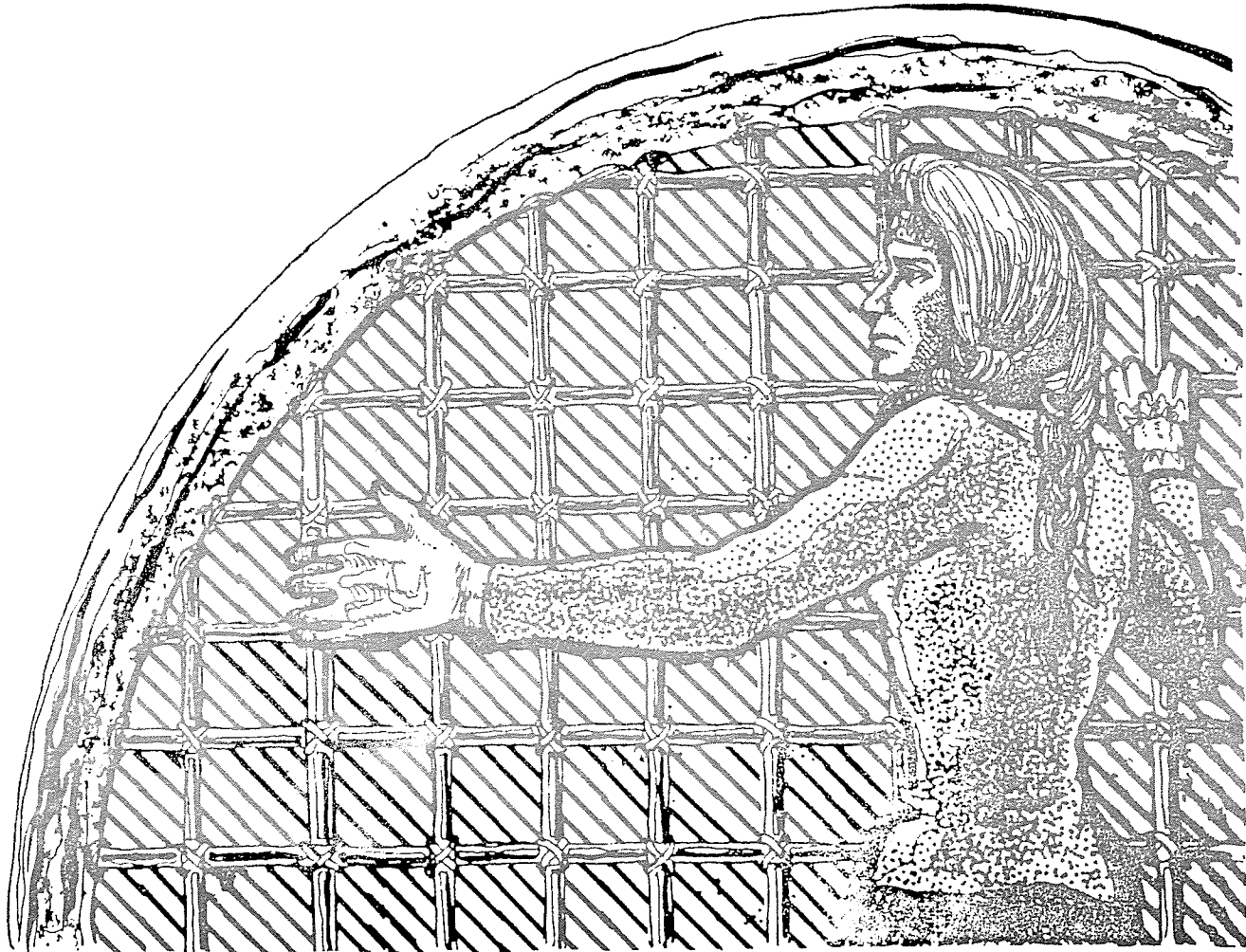
City Of The Winds, Or, It's Sister Jenny's Turn To Throw The Bomb

Project Tape R-230, Roantree recording:

THIS WILL PROBABLY BE MY LAST TAPE ON THIS SIDE OF TIME. I'LL TAKE EVERYTHING WITH ME THAT I CAN -- WE HAVE NO IDEA WHAT WILL HAPPEN TO ANYTHING OR ANYONE LEFT ON THE SHIP WHEN TIME CHANGES -- BUT THERE'S A LIMIT TO WHAT WE CAN CARRY. I'LL HAVE TO LEAVE BEHIND THE PLATINUM JET GRILL FROM THE SUNFIRE... WELL, IF IT'S STILL THERE WHEN I COME BACK, I'LL KNOW THAT THE TIME-LINES HAVE CONVERGED. IF IT'S GONE, I'LL KNOW THAT WE'VE ONLY STEPPED FROM ONE UNIVERSE TO ANOTHER. HELL OF A TEST.

...ARE WE DOING THE RIGHT THING? WHAT CHOICE DO WE HAVE? OUR WORLD, OUR UNIVERSE, IS GIVEN OVER TO THE ROMULANS. BAILEY'S PLAN DEALS WITH TOO MANY UNKNOWN. THIS IS THE ONLY ACTION THAT WE'RE HALFWAY SURE ABOUT. WHAT CHOICE? WHAT OTHER CHOICE? IF ONLY WE, OR KIRK, OR SOMEONE ELSE, KNEW MORE ABOUT THE ALTERNATE TIME-LINES, OR HOW THE GUARDIAN OF FOREVER WORKS... BUT ALL WE CAN DO IS CHOOSE, IN RELATIVE IGNORANCE, BETWEEN THE HELL WE KNOW AND THE HEAVEN WE'VE HEARD OFF.

AND THEN THERE'S JIM, MY BROTHER, MY SHADOW, MY STRANGE, TORMENTED TWIN... WILL BE LAST THROUGH TOMORROW, OR THE NEXT DAY, OR HOWEVER LONG IT TAKES, TO STOP PENNINGTON AND WARN HIS EARLIER SELF? HE'S DYING ON HIS FEET -- SOME WILD AND TERRIBLE VARIANT OF THE WHEEZES... WHY HASN'T ANYONE ELSE IN THE CREW CAUGHT IT? PERHAPS BECAUSE HE'S SPENT SO MUCH MORE TIME WITH US.



THAN THEY HAVE... BUT IF HE GOT THIS FROM US, THEN WHY HAVEN'T ANY OF US SHOWN SYMPTOMS THAT BAD? MAYBE BECAUSE WE'VE ALL HAD IT AS CHILDREN, GOT OUR IMMUNITIES THEN: I'VE HEARD THAT IT SOMETIMES CAN BE BAD IN ADULTS, BUT... THIS BAD? FATAL? JEAN DOESN'T KNOW. NEITHER DOES CHAPEL-DOCTOR. IF ONLY JIM CAN LAST UNTIL WE CHANGE TIME, GET BACK TO HIS UNIVERSE WITH ITS BETTER MEDICINE... HE'S JUST GOT TO LAST! WE CAN'T VERY WELL SET TIME RIGHT WITHOUT HIM.

BACK TO BUSINESS. I, JENNETH TRAJANA KIRK ROANTREE, WEDDED PIKE/TWO-FEATHERS/VANDERHOOF, HEREBY MAKE MY TESTAMENT AND DISPOSITION OF PROPERTY IN CASE OF MY DEATH ON THE MISSION TO BE UNDERTAKEN TOMORROW. MY HOUSE AND LANDS, HERDS AND HOARDINGS, ALL OTHER GOODS ON EARTH... IF THEY SURVIVE, AND SUCH PERSONAL GOODS AND GEAR AS I'VE BROUGHT WITH ME, I LEAVE TO MY HUSBAND-- PIETER DAVID HAWKINS VANDERHOOF, WEDDED JOHANSEN/TWO-FEATHERS/ROANTREE. IF HE DOES NOT SURVIVE ME, I LEAVE THE AFORESAID PROPERTY TO MY BEST FRIEND AND FORMER DRONE-- QUANNECHOTA MARIE GRAYSON TWO-FEATHERS, WEDDED PIKE/ROANTREE/KIRK. IF SHE DOES NOT SURVIVE ME, I LEAVE THE AFORESAID PROPERTY TO MY... BROTHER-- JAMES T. KIRK, WEDDED... TWO FEATHERS. IF HE DOES NOT SURVIVE ME, I LEAVE THE AFORESAID PROPERTY TO BE DIVIDED EQUALLY AMONG MY SURVIVING CREW OF THE SUNFIRE.

MAY THE SUN SHINE ON OUR VENTURE TOMMORROW, AND MAY ALL THE GODS IN AGREEMENT GRANT US SUCCESS.

Quannechota awoke promptly, remembering at once what day this was and what her work in it would be. For all her habitual stoicism, her hear began to pund with excitement. She rolled toward Kirk, reached gently for his shoulder, and stopped right there as three chillfacts assailed her at once.

One: there was more blood on the pillow. Two: she couldn't hear him breathing. Three: his skin felt cold.

For one horrified instant she thought she was in bed with a corpse. She gasped, and jerked her hand away. At the motion he stirred and dragged his eye open. He looked terrible. Quanna reached out and hugged him hard.

"Quanna," he murmured, hardly above a whisper. "Tell Scotty... can't take my... shift today. Too damn sick..."

"Jim!" She gave his arm a shake. "Have you forgotten what day this is? We arrive at the Guardian's world at 0194 hours."

"Guardian..." His eye opened wide and began to gleam. "It's today! Yes! Quanna..." He clutched her arm with a grip that was, all things considered, reassuringly strong. "Can you find me a shirt that fits decently? My other pants-- Maybe a jacket, too. Is it really that cold in here, or is it just me? Hmm... The medicine, too, and my shotgun. The tapes-- I've got to call Scotty and Christine about the log-tapes. My own-" he halted, breath catching in his throat, trying not to cough.

"Yes, in a moment," Quanna soothed, reaching for the medicine. "Just a little cough-syrup; you must stay alert."

Kirk swallowed the medicine without complaint, pulled himself upright and tottered into the bathroom. The sonics felt very good on his chest and back, the rattling sound-waves shaking the loose pain in his lungs. I'll last, he reflected. Enough strength left for the job...

Quanna stepped into the bathroom when he came out, leaving his clothes neatly arranged on the bed. He pulled on his briefs, smiled a little as he slid into the balck t-shirt, then bent down to put on his socks. His right foot, he noticed, still dropped from the ankle. Not all the retraining he'd done would bring it up to normal. I'm still crippled, he thought. It doesn't matter here, but it will at home... I'll lose the ship, unless Bones can fix me... or maybe the Guardian... He put on his leg-brace, finished dressing, and slipped on his Crown-of-Mirrors. It was surprising how much the lopsided crown had become a part of him, how much he'd learned to use it, rely on it, miss it when he wasn't waering it. So, I'm adaptable... always could make the best of a bad situation... He felt his ribs, confirming that even through two shirts they stood out like knuckles on a fist. ...and it IS a bad situation... It hurt to remember that his body had once been thought handsome, and that he'd been proud of it. Now it was just a rickety machine that carried him around, and he worried that it might break down before it carried him home. I've had all the pride kicked out of me, he concluded. Pride and all its connections: vanity, arrogance, self-confidence... all gone. Nothing left now but determination. I'll finish this. Finish... He pulled on his boots.

"What do you wish for breakfast?" asked Quannechita, coming out of the bathroom and reaching for her clothes.
"Nothing." The very thought of food made his stomach hurt.

"Very well." She dressed quickly, fastened her good horizon-stone belt over her buckskin shirt and took up a small wooden box. She hunted through it, then lifted out two enormous silver-hoop earrings with little pendants of feathers and crystal stars. Kirk watched, intrigued, while she hung them from her earlobes.

"You look as if you're dressing for a dance," he smiled.

"More precisely, for an important ceremony." She took out a little clay jar, dipped a fingertip in it, and carefully rubbed the silver ointment on her eyelids. "We are changing the universe, Restoring the Sun, are we not?" She smiled back as she put her warpaint away.

"True..." He remembered the Solstice Rite. Prelude... and... this is reality. He went to the mirror and studied his reflection. It shook him. I don't need any ritual trappings, he thought. I already look like the Spirit of the Old Year! He shut the cabinet door, firmly locking away the unsettling image. "Come on, Quanna," he said, reaching for her hand. "Let's go change Time."

* * *

At 0920 Kirk walked into the transporter room, Quanna beside him, wearing a light jacket over his uniform, carrying the usual landing-party gear plus his shotgun and a large shoulder-slung pouch stuffed full of tapes. The Anarchists, filling the transporter room and spilling out into the corridor, shuffled aside to clear a path for him. Kirk noticed that the rest of them were, like Quanna, decked out in their best gear. Roantree, too, was wearing earrings with star-shaped pendants, and Sparks wore an odd hat-- bone-colored, with a veil hanging from the sides and back, and a wide stiff black visor pierced with a bullet-hole. It looked like an ancient Foreign Legion kepi whose first owner had died in it. Kirk grinned and waved informal salutes as he moved past them and approached the transporter platform.

Between the pad and the control console stood Uhura, and DeSalle, and the ship's remaining Security personnel-- all huddled together and looking uncomfortable. Scott stood at the controls, as haggard and worn as Kirk had ever seen him; obviously he hadn't gotten much sleep, if any. Kirk took in the scene at a glance and groaned to himself. Lord, please, no last-minute fights! he prayed, strolling calmly to the platform. "Is the whole landing-party?" he asked, looking carefully at Scott as he stepped onto the forward station. "Have we left anyone out?"

"Och, no," said Scott, winking desperate signals. "If anythin', we've got too many!"

"Leave some of yours, then," Bailey grumbled. "We've more than enough to stop four unsuspecting people."

Scott looked ill.

"What?" Kirk grinned boldly at the glum Mechanic. "You mean to take all the glory for yourselves? Come on, it wouldn't be fair to leave my people out of it completely."

"Sure, let them all come," said Roantree, stepping onto the pad beside him. "The more the merrier."

"By all means," Quannechota agreed, taking the next station.

"Well, I'm not the one who's complaining," said Bailey, hopping onto the next pad.

Jean Batten-le-Diable and Uhura simultaneously clambered onto the two remaining stations, leaving DeSalle-- just behind Uhura-- out in the cold. Before DeSalle could say anything stupid, Kirk waved him back. "Patience," Kirk smiled at the crowd, with more confidence than he felt. "We'll all get there in plenty of time. Energize, Scotty."

Scott looked down at the controls and saw that his hands were shaking on them. What's Jim doing? he thought. Smoothing it over, taking you savages with him, blithe as a lad going to a wedding... And what am I doing, letting them go?

I could stop this, stop them all, send them into stasis the way I did to the Klingons on Beta 12-A, then bring Jim back... But he didn't signal me to do it! ...but the way he is, the way he's been since the disaster... so strange and distant... now deathly ill... does he truly know what he's doing? Is he fit to command anymore? Am I doing the right thing? He glanced up at Kirk, searching frantically for some sign to guide him.

"Don't dawdle," Kirk grinned back, with no smile at all in the level one-eyed stare he fixed on the hesitating Engineer. "Energize."

"Aye, Sir." Scott numbly pushed the levers down. Trust him to Command? he thought, watching the figures sparkle and fade. Why not? I know I'm no good at it! Whatever ability he has left is still more than mine!

The humming faded. Scott watched while another crowd, five Anarchists and one Red-Shirt, climbed onto the platform and stepped onto the empty stations. With no further thoughts he beamed them down, and the next six, and the next, and all the rest after that.

* * *

Six by six they materialized on the chill twilight surface of the Guardian's world. Scott's transportation-aim had been perfect; they stood at the edge of the ruined city, with the silent arch of the Guardian less than 20 meters away. The Anarchists briefly checked themselves and their gear, then stared about them, taking in the awesome desolation. Even after the last team dematerialized and no more came, no one Spock until Kirk flipped open his communicator to report that they'd all arrived safely. Scott's voice clipped back a brief, expressionless acknowledgement.

Kirk put away his communicator and looked about, amused to see the Red-Shirts crowding close to him on one side and the Anarchists watching patiently from the other. All eyes on me... He glanced questioningly at Roantree.

"Go on, Jim," she said. "It's your show. You know the territory."

Kirk smiled at that, considering the irony of the Anarchists' trust and Scott's hesitation, then turned and led the way to the Guardian. They halted before the dull-metal arch, the Anarchists studying it with undisguised amazement.

"Is that all there is to it?" Jean Battre-le-Diable couldn't help being disappointed. "It doesn't look like much."

"Appearances mean little." Quannechota almost smiled, glancing at Kirk. "What matters is ability."

"The Womb of Time..." Roantree murmured, remembering old hopes. What is it, really?"

That's the question I asked, first time here, Kirk recalled. If it says "A question... I have awaited a question", then I'll know that this IS the first time, and the Guardian doesn't know everything, can't do everything, and there's little hope for--

A faint sound that might almost have been a chuckle echoed from the Guardian. Dim light played under its surface.

"Welcome, Voyagers," it said.

The Anarchists assortedly gasped, jumped and squeaked in surprise. The Security crew murmured to themselves like a hive of unquiet bees. Kirk only sighed with a vast relief. He stepped up to the arch, close enough to touch it.

"Do you know why I'm here?" he asked.

"You wish to visit Chicago, on Earth, 1990 by your reckoning, at the moemnt of the divergence of times."

"Then you must know what I want to do; change a timeline 200 years long... and nine months, for me... Can this be done?"

"It can be done." The Guardian hummed warmly to itself, internal light flickering across its structure, resembling a stardrive engine warming up for warp 8. "You can alter the path."

"Wait," Roantree demanded, shouldering her way to the arch. "Tell me, will we all survive? We're from different timelines, Jim and I, his people and mine..."

"Enter and exit together." The Guardian sounded faintly impatient. "Those who survive shall continue."

"Clear as mud," Bailey grumbled. "How do we all fit through that narrow arch as the same time?"

"Join hands," Kirk suggested, reaching for Quanna's. "Hmmm... One other thing, Guardian: if I go back and warn my earlier self, all this will never have happened. What will become of-- of the me that's here now?"

"All shall be conserved." The Guardian sounded distinctly bored. "Nothing that survives shall be lost. That which passes joined shall be converged to it match."

Kirk tried to decipher that, grew dizzy, and gave up.

"And how will we get back?" Roantree insisted. "We can't survive if we drown with Chicago!"

"If you succeed," the Guardian gave the impression of yawning, "you will be returned to your time upon demand."

"You call, and it brings you back," Kirk explained. He saw the mists forming in the center of the arch and tensed to jump. "It'll be close," he warned Quannechota. "The flow moves so fast..." The images began. He watched, not daring to blink, waiting for a sight of the proper instant. Quannechota reached her other hand to Roantree, who took it and reached for Sparks. The other Anarchists crowded close, linking hands. Jean Battre-le-Diable, paking a soil sample into his pocket, was the last to join the chain.



"Do it!" snapped Uhura, grabbing one of DeSalle's hands and reaching for the Security-man next to her. "Link hands, like them, so we'll all go through together."

A familiar image flashed in the mist-- a scene from shortly before 1990. "Now!" Kirk yelled, lunging forward into the gateway. The Anarchists leaped after him, pushing each other forward in the mad dash. Uhura pushed DeSalle toward the rolling mists and the last Anarchist in line, shouting, "Grab his hand!"

DeSalle obediently jumped forward, reaching for the hand of the last Anarchist-- and then saw that it was Jean battre-le-Diable. DeSalle gasped, flinched, missed his hold, but jumped after the little Anarchist anyway, one step behind.

It was one step too much. The mists vanished in a split second, with a ragged gulping noise, leaving DeSalle and Uhura and the rest of the Security team to tumble through the arch and land in a clumsy heap in the undistinguished dust on the other side.

Uhura clambered out of the pile of dazed bodies, scrambled to her feet and looked, horrified, at the empty arch. Nothing moved there: no mist, no light, no sound-- except a faint metallic noise that might have been a chuckle, a hiccup, or a belch. Uhura dug her hands into her hair and screamed in despair and rage.

* * *

Forty-two Anarchists and one battered Starship Captain skidded and stubled and tumbled and sprawled into the middle of a large field full of tall weeds. For a few minutes they did nothing but groan and wear and feel for bruises. It took Kirk a longer time to catch his breath, longer still to sit up and readjust his Crown-of-Mirrors. Careful, he reminded himself. Conserve strength.

"Oof. I can think of easier ways to travel," Roantree complained, rubbing her knee. "Where are we, and where are the rest?"

"Rest...?" Kirk struggled to his feet and looked at their surroundings. Early-evening shadows and years-long deposits of dust on the crystalline dome overhead darkened the huge amphitheatre around them, but even in the dim light, the pale bones of thousands of human skeletons were grimly visible in the stands. He recognized it perfectly. "Soldier's Field! Exactly where we beamed down last time... Guardian--" Then he noticed the conspicuous lack of red uniforms. "What did it do with Uhura? DeSalle, the others-- not one of them..."

"Perhaps the Guardian did not wish them to accompany us," Quannechota suggested. "The Absence may be deliberate, considering the Guardian's precision in bringing us here. In any case, we have enough personnel for the task."

"Not too exact in time, though." Kirk squinted at the sky. "It was full daylight that first time."

"Could we be early?" Roantree asked, hitching her shoulders higher. All those skeletons unsettled her.

"We have to be." Kirk tugged his jacket closed. "The city's still here. The flood came and destroyed it while Spock and Bones were still in the library, only a little while after I beamed up. We have until tomorrow, at least."

"Fine." Roantree raised her shotgun for attention. "Decision time, people," she announced. "Do we wait for Pennington here, or at the Library."

"Here," grunted Bailey. "We'll surround the field and shoot her the minute she shows."

"Shoot...?" Kirk gulped.

"No, not good," said Hot-Trot. "The Innocents will be with her here, and we don't want to shoot them by accident."

"Besides," said Quanna. "they will not know us, nor of her treachery. If we shoot her in their sight, they will be more liable to shoot back than listen to explanations or heed our warnings."

"Jim," Roantree turned to him. "When was the first time that Pennington was out of your sight, that other visit?"

"Not until we went to the library. What do you mean, shoot her? All you have to do is stop her, get the phaser diagram from her, make the others understand, and get out of there. It may be a damn sight easier if you don't shoot her, you know..."

"Perhaps," Roantree shrugged. "Well, what's the quickest way to the Library?"

"I remember, we went out that gate and found a usable car in the parking lot..." He led the way across the weed-grown field, over the fallen fence and into the stands. They picked their way up the narrow aisles, carefully avoiding the bones. There were so many skeletons...

"Jim, what killed them all? Do you know?" Roantree's voice sounded loud in the twilight. "So many of them, so fast..."

"Plague. A specially-designed, fast-spreading, fast-killing virus. It mutated to a harmless form very quickly, but not before it killed the city."

"Specially designed?" Bailey growled, stepping disdainfully over a sprawled set of leg-bones. "A Germ_warfare weapon? Heh! That's how Science got a bad name, doing things like that! Stupid, State-loving sheep..."

"Save your breath," panted Sparks, "according to the map, we've got a good walk ahead."

"Maybe we can find some cars that still work," Kirk considered. "We found one last time."

"I doubt we could find enough working cars to transport 43 people," said Roantree, "and there isn't much daylight-time left for a search."

"Besides," Quannechota added, "we must leave an operable vehicle for the Innocents to find easily, so there will be no alteration in the pattern."

"The 'Innocents'?" Kirk muttered as they entered the tunnel leading under the stands. "Quaint title; very forgiving. I always did suspect that 'innocence' was just a polite word for 'stupidity'." He hadn't meant that to be overheard, but the tunnel echoed and magnified his voice.

"It can also mean 'not guilty'." Roantree gave him a sympathetic look. "It means we're giving the rest of the party the benefit of the doubt."

"I was one of them, and I remember what I did." Kirk stared into the darkening sky at the end of the tunnel. "I was damned fool. To think that lives and worlds and whole universes should be at the mercy of such fools!"

They came out in the parking lot beside the sullen slate-gray lake, amid a silent crowd of rusted vehicles and tumble bones. The wind caught Kirk with unexpected force and sent him reeling against Quannechota. Sparks caught both of them. He set Quanna back on her feet, held Kirk upright with one arm, pulled out a map and handed it to Roantree. She opened and studied it, politely not noticing how Kirk struggled to stand up.

"We've got maybe an hour's march ahead of us," she announced, "and a bivouac beyond that. It'll be dark in half an hour, and I'm sure the old lighting system doesn't work. People, do we have enough lights? Or should we do some scavenging here for more?"

The rest of the Anarchists mutely held up assorted ship's belt-lights and tri-magnesite tablets, old High harbor battery-torches and luciferin lamps. Nobody wanted to rummage around in that ghastly parking lot.

"Tres bien," Roantree grinned, understanding. "Let's move, then." She led the way through the stadium lot, out the sagging wire gate and into the shadowed street, walking a little more quickly than normal. Kirk, leaning painfully against

the wind, stumbled twice trying to keep up with her. Sparks and Quannechota unobtrusively came up beside him, letting his weight drop on them when he missed his footing, and he didn't resist their help. ...I don't want to fall in a pile of bones, he thought. No, hell, I really am sick, got to save my strength for what's important, and it's a long walk...

It was longer than expected. Obligated to stay near the streets for directions, the party wove its way through the dead hulks of vehicles and their skeletal passengers, being scrupulously careful not to touch anything. The sun had set completely by the time they emerged from the last tree-shadows of Grant Park and turned northward on Michigan Avenue. By the time they passed Roosevelt Road it was dark enough for the Anarchists to feel justified in breaking out their luciferin lamps, and Roantree pulled out a hand-held battery-torch to spy out the ground ahead. Like a luminous centipede, glowing sharp white and firefly-green, the train of marchers wound its way up the broad back street, between the dim park and the westward cliff of silent, bone-colored skyscrapers. Nobody spoke until they passed Adams Street and came to a huge white building above a wide stone stairway flanked with overgrown formal gardens. In the twilight they could make out shadows of elaborate carbing and bits of engraved names. Featureless tatters of once huge banners hung from thick flagpoles on the pillared second story. Before the central doors stood a statue of a man in an American Revolutionary War uniform, and to either side of the stairs, on high stone platforms, stood enormous bronze lions-- all pale green with corrosion. The Anarchists stopped to stare and marvel.



"What is this place, a temple?" Roantree wondered. "It's too far south to be the Library."

"Too far north to be the great Museum of Science and Industry," muttered Sparks, consulting the map.

"I believe this is the Art Institute," said Quannechota. "This front building contains the galleries. The school is the large complex behind this. To our left, where the lion's muzzle seems to be pointing, note a large slab-shaped edifice; it is the Prudential Building. We have nearly reached our goal."

"An Art building," Roantree whispered, not taking her eyes off the carved facade. "Lord of Light! All this, a whole acre and more, just for Art... that's not even counting Music! Jim, in your universe is there anything like this?"

"That's nothing," panted Kirk, tired and impatient to move on. "Most civilized planets I know have schools the size of your average city. You could drop this whole complex into Starfleet Academy, and never find it again."

The Anarchists looked at him, looked at the building, looked at each other, then turned without a word and marched on.

The roof of the Art Institute was clearly visible behind them in the clouded moonlight when they came up to Washington Street and on the south end of the Chicago Public Library. "Not here," Kirk insisted, his voice harsh with fatigue. "We stopped at the next street, the north end. Go in that way."

The Anarchists obligingly moved on, marching faster now, Sparks and Quannechota almost dragging Kirk between them, their packs bouncing on their backs. They slewed off the street and onto the sidewalk, along the massive pale-gray wall of the Library, past an old steel-and-glass hooded stairway entrance, past a cornerstone bearing the legend "1893--Grand Army of the Republic", passed another hooded entryway, and then they ran out of sidewalk.

"Randolph Street!" yelled Sparks. "This is it!"

They shuffled to a halt, turned, and faced into the dim tunnel of a much narrower street-- and the front steps of the

fabulous Library. The weed-grown steps, the bases of the huge stone columns, the wide-porch and the sidewalk below were littered with dimly-gleaming bones. For a moment nobody spoke, save for a quiet collective drawing of breath and a whispered oath from Kirk.

"We've arrived," said Roantree. "From the Womb of Time to the Doors of Change. Let's go in and make camp."

She led them up the dark wide steps, between the massive dark columns and through the left-side pair of bronze doors that were so stiff with corrosion that she needed Sparks' help to open them. Were they that stiff the first time? Kirk wondered, leaning heavily on Quanna's shoulders. I don't remember. Spock opened them... or did we use the other pair of doors? Details... details... The wet wind cut through his jacket as if it were of tissue paper, making him shiver from head to foot, leeching out his strength. Another fit of coughing shook him. Quannechota gnawed her lip and half-carried him through the doors.

Beyond the double doors everything seemed made of pale marble and bone. It looked like a mausoleum in the dim light, and the Anarchists were quick to pull out hand-torches and turn them on. First came a wide short hall with banks of glass doors leading off to either side, and a triple archway ahead. In the center stood a huge white marble desk littered with crumbling books and rag-draped bones. The Anarchists delicately avoided it, and hurried through the archway into the next room. This hall was larger, likewise flanked with side-doors that led to offices and reading-rooms, and to either side stood huge square white-marble columns that appeared to hold up half the building. Beyond them rose a white marble staircase that divided before a great dark-glass window overlooking an internal courtyard. The marble balustrades ended in thick square white marble posts as tall as a standing man.

"Those'd make good places for tri-magnesite torches," Sparks suggested. "Here, I'm tall enough. I'll do it myself."

"Hell of a place to camp," Roantree muttered, looking around the room as Sparks hammered the tablets into flame. There were fewer skeletons here than in the outer hall, and the thick brown carpet was still intact and soft. "Dust and bones everywhere... Can't be healthy. Still, it's the best we've seen so far."

"Like camping in a tomb," Battre-le-Diable agreed. Nonetheless, he took off his pack and began hunting for a good place to lay out his bedroll. The other Anarchists grudgingly followed his example, many of them breaking out more tri-magnesite tablets.

"One of these small doors must lead to a broom closet," Bailey commented, tugging on likely doorknobs. "I don't think the Innocents will notice if this one hall's cleaned up a little."

"Good idea," said Roantree, opening her pack. "And it wouldn't hurt to scout for usable water, but nobody leave this room without at least one partner, and nobody touch those bones with your bare hands. Let the rest of us get settled in for the night and set up a sentry roster."

The other Anarchists milled about, complying. They seemed to move aimlessly, but the tasks were completed in surprisingly little time. The bones were taken out and thrown behind the counter of the front desk, the carpet rigorously swept, bedrolls laid out and a work-roster completed, all within a quarter hour.

Sparks and Quannechota were waiting for Kirk when he came tottering out of the bathroom. "But I've been awake only four hours or so," he protested feebly as they guided him to an open bedroll at the foot of the stairs. "I'm not sleepy, and there's so much to plan..."

"We'll do that in the morning." Sparks gently but firmly settled Kirk on the bedroll, and tugged off his boots. "Tomorrow's a busy day, and you need your sleep."

Kirk would have argued longer, but his attention was snagged by something Quannechota pulled out of her pack. It was a full size, wood-and-brass, bead-trimmed tomahawk. One side of the head was a wickedly-sharp hatchet blade, the other side was a pipe-bowl, and the long straight handle was hollow. He studied it with bemused interest while she rummaged further in her gear. "All right," he asked as she came up with a small paper-wrapped packet, "a hatchet, or a pipe?"

"Either, or both." She unwrapped the paper to reveal a familiar lump of gummy brown resin. "Weapon or peace-pipe, as needed. It is my Calumet." She pinched out a large crumb of resin and rewrapped the rest. "The Eastern Tribe's name is more commonly used: 'tomahawk'." She dropped the fragment into the pipe-bowl, lit it with her tinderbox, and handed it to Kirk. "Draw quickly, or it will go out."

Kirk chuckled and complied, remembering the first time he'd used one of these things. He'd been woefully clumsy and Miramane's father had looked pained, but after a few tries he'd learned to manage tolerably well. Parallels, parallels... he thought, taking a deep breath. The thick sweet smoke flowed into his sore lungs like war honey ...pipe design different... that one had no hatchet-blade... no matter... He closed his eye and concentrated on breathing. Memories of Miramane's face and voice long-legged body drifted through his mind. A little while later he noticed that the resin-lump was gone. Quannechota studied his face for a moment, then slid the Calumet gently out of his loosening grip and pulled off his Crown-of-Mirrors.

"This method is much more efficient than a bowl with burning charcoal in it," she explained, pushing a rolled-up jacket under his head and tugging the blankets up under his chin. "Now sleep."

"...not much choice..." he murmured, drifting off in a quiet, painless haze. "I'm just a little cold..."

Quannechota considered that, got up and conferred briefly with Sparks, then came back and slid under the blankets with Kirk. He smiled and rolled gratefully into the warm circle of her arms. Quannechota nestled her face into the hollow of his shoulder, rubbed her hands up and down his back in slow comforting circles, and crooned her favorite medicine-chant into his ear. Even after his slow breathing assured her that he was safely asleep, she was unwilling to stop.

Roantree stood at the corner, watched by a nervous sentry on the library stairs, trying to take sightings of the cloud-veiled stars. She jumped at the sound of approaching steps and turned to see Bailey come plodding up, looking glum. "What's wrong? No water?" Roantree guessed.

"No, not that. We traced the pipes on that faucet that worked; it leads to a tank holding several hundred gallons, enough to last us a few days all right. Problem is, I don't know where we can find safe food when our supplies run out. How long will we have to stay here?"

"I'm trying to figure that out..." Roantree rubbed the eyepiece of the telescope on her sleeve. "Anyway, there must be food-stores in the area. Canned or dried food would probably be safe; it's only been... what, five years or so since the plague?"

"You don't sound very sure." Bailey idly kicked a bone aside. It rolled off the curb with a clatter.

"Stop that!" Roantree snapped. Bailey gave her an annoyed glance, and she remembered to keep good hold of her nerves. "Look, we can use Jim's tricorder to tell if the food's safe."

"Yeah, I suppose..." Bailey ground her heel on a crawling tendril of chickweed, mashing it into the concrete.

The motion set Roantree's teeth on edge. "Something else gnawing you?" she asked, a little sharply.

"Well... Would it do any harm to fumigate the hall tomorrow? I've found some good strong cleaning chemicals, and it can't be healthy having all that... dust lying around where we've camped."

Is that all? Roantree wondered. "No, go ahead and scrub it out tomorrow morning, when the shift changes and everyone's awake. I don't think the Innocents will make anything of one hall being free of dust and bones." She frowned up at the sky, trying to guess when the cloud-cover would pass. "Hell, even if they do, it won't matter. Pennington will be away from them, and we'll catch her while they're mulling about in here."

"Fine. No problem, then... provided that Jim's telling the truth."



"What?" Roantree swung sharply around to look Bailey in the face. "Just what do you mean by that?"

"I mean that he could be lying." Bailey hunched her shoulders and met Roantree's stare head-on. "He was half-crazy when we met him, he isn't completely sane now, and you've seen him come up with some pretty wild ideas. He could be misleading us to Luna-knows-where. How do you know he isn't?"

"Maybe because I know him better than you. He's my brother, after all." Now she'll dig at me. Keep temper. Let her carp. Let her retreat with honor...

"Uhuh. 'My kin, right or wrong'. We've seen that in him, too."

Roantree didn't rise to the bait. Irritated, Bailey tried again. "Is that why you let him play 'Exclusive' with Quanna?"

Roantree's hands twitched. That barb hurt.

"Don't know why you let him do that." Bailey rubbed her right elbow again, and pressed her advantage. "Not unless you're so hot for him yourself, even though he won't have you, that you let him take Quanna just so you can share the fun through your mind-link--"

Roantree took two fast steps forward, swinging the telescope like a club. Her eyes glittered green as a cat's. Bailey jumped back, belatedly realizing that she'd gone too far.

"Hey, ice it!" snapped the sentry on the porch. He hadn't heard the argument, but he knew a fight when he saw one. "Save it for Judas Pennington!"

Roantree stopped, shook her head sharply, and lowered the telescope.

"Uh... Hey, look, I'm more than 60," Bailey offered. "I'm living on borrowed time, and I can say anything I like. Okay?"

"Say anymore like that and your time will be called in," Roantree growled. Nonetheless, she tucked the telescope safely into her belt. "I've had it with your loose talk, old woman. If you've got any more accusations, bring 'em up at the next meeting."

"There's only one thing worth asking," Bailey admitted, the grumbling tone gone from her voice. "And that's what we'll do if he's led us wrong. Suppose I do bring that up; you have any answers?"

"Just this: we know the date that Pennington's due to show, and we know what Jim said happened. We don't know what date this is, but as soon as the stars are clear I'll have Quanna come figure it out. So when that day comes, if Pennington doesn't show-- or if what happened is radically different from what Jim told us-- then I say we go back to the Guardian and proceed with your plan. We'll go to the Moon People, just before their return to Earth, give them phasers too, and tell them the way to make peace with the Luddites, restore Science, and keep Freedom. Will that satisfy you?"

"Yeah..." Bailey shrugged acquiescence. "That'll satisfy me." She straightened her shoulders, one a little stiffer than the other, and walked back into the Library.

Roantree watched her go, thinking somber thoughts. It's true. Jim had a bad enemy in her. She shivered in the growing chill of the wind from the lake. ...and maybe so do I...

* * *

Time passed, Kirk was dimly aware of that, but of little else. Once he felt someone bending over him, kind hands feeling for his pulse, and he thought it was McCoy. Bones, he pleaded silently, Bones, is it over? Am I home? Will it be all right now? He managed, with infinite effort, to drag his eye a little way open. The face that swam into focus above him was gentle and concerned, but it was shaggy-haired and bearded and not McCoy's. Sparks... He let his eye drop shut again. Gold old Sparks... but I'm still here. Not finished. More of this... He grew aware of the soft weight of blankets, the whisper of voices not far off, the leaden pain in his chest and the warmth of several canteens full of hot water laid beside him in the bedroll. Bed-warmers, he guessed. Quann kept me warm before... Where's she gone?

Broad hands lifted his head and shoulders, pulled him against a wide chest and shook him gently. "Hey Jim, wake up," said Sparks. "Time to eat."

After two tries Kirk managed to get his eye all the way open. Sparks was holding him up, and a pot sat bubbling on a camp-stove nearby, wafting him a smell of stew. More stove-fires and cook-pots were in use among the bedroll-clusters beyond, where the other Anarchists appeared to be changing shifts. A sullen gray light seeped through the windows.

"Mid-morning!" Kirk gasped, scrabbling around for his Crown-of-Mirrors and his boots. "I've got to get up! Maybe today--"

"No, not today. Quanna took a reading off the stars last night and got the exact date. They'll be here tomorrow. We got nothing to do today but map out the territory. You've got nothing to do but rest and save up your strength. Understand?"



"Tomorrow...?" Kirk leaned against Sparks and panted for a moment. The cough medicine had completely worn off, leaving him brutally aware of the pain in his chest and the terrible weakness everywhere else. Little as he liked them, he knew that Sparks' instructions were wise. "All right... I'm not really hungry. A little of that stew will go a long way."

Sparks obliged him with a bowl and spoon. The stew was thin enough to be properly called soup, but Kirk didn't mind; the few bits of meat he managed to get down stuck in his stomach like sharp chunks of plastic. Just sitting was tiring. The air seemed chill and he was grateful when Sparks replaced the cooled canteens with hot ones. Cold, weak, constant pain, no appetite... he considered. I don't need a doctor to tell me I'm getting close to the edge... Tomorrow. Just let me last that long...

He sat down the bowl, growing aware of another problem; he moved his legs experimentally, wondering how well and how long they'd hold him up, and finally admitted that he was going to need some help. "Uhm, Sparks, I hate to bother you, but... uh..."

"You gotta go to the john?"

"Just help me as far as the door," Kirk whispered, furiously embarrassed. "I can manage from there, thanks."

"Sure. No problem." Sparks calmly bent down and picked him up as easily as if he were a rag doll, and toted him across the hall. Nobody so much as glanced twice at them. Sparks set him down by the door and leaned against the wall to wait. He was still there when Kirk came back out, picked him up and carried him back to the bedroll, all without comment.

Much less embarrassed and considerably more thoughtful, Kirk felt through the pouches on his belt and pulled out a silver thermal blanket.

"Hey, that's pretty..." Sparks coaxed the blanket from Kirk's grip, admired it momentarily, then deftly pushed Kirk back down among the hot-water canteens and spread the blanket over him. The other blankets followed.

"Nursemaid..." Kirk teased him, relaxing in the comforting heat.

"Hell, I can think of worse jobs," Sparks grinned back, filling a bowl of stew for himself.

"Mmm. Where's Quanna?"

"With Jen, out mapping. Just about everybody who's awake this shift is out mapping. I expect they'll want to see you in awhile, go over the maps and movements and strategy, and like that."

"Be sure I'm awake when they come in."

"Sure. You go to sleep now."

"I'll try," Kirk sighed, bemusedly accepting his incongruous burse. He watched while Sparks emptied his bowl, wiped it dry with a piece of bread, ate the bread and seared the bowl clean over the stove-flame. Neat way to wash dishes without water, he reflected. Clever... and kindly... and from what I... saw... not bad in bed. Any of these women might like him... but why did Jenneth marry him? Simple eugenics? He'd father big, strong, smart, healthy kids... probably wouldn't be too hard to live with... but anything more? ...does she love him? Could I, if I were--- I am...

The thought ended right there, as sharply as if cut by an axe. He couldn't make himself even try to see a lover through Jenneth's eyes, not since that one time he'd tried. The whole idea made him acutely uncomfortable. But as he watched the big Radioman hunting through his pack and fussing over his tools, Kirk's thoughts wandered off in an only slightly different direction. Who is he, really? Where did Jenneth meet him? Her world's smaller than mine... must be someone I've met somewhere, sometime... Vanderhoof? Don't remember the name... or the face... of course he'd look different without all the hair...

Sparks got up and noticed Kirk looking at him. "Can't you sleep, Jim? You want something?"

"A little company, maybe." Kirk wriggled into a more comfortable position among the hot-water canteens. "I was just wondering... Where did you meet Jenneth, Sparks?"

"Jen? Aw... back at school." Sparks put his tools away and sprawled out on the carpet beside Kirk. "She was struggling along in basic Electronics, and I was sliding easy in it. The math of mixed series-and-parallel circuits really threw her at first. She asked me for help, and I showed her how to work it, and she caught on OK. Next week, when we got to transistors and gain-drop, she came back again. Pretty soon I was teaching her more than the Prof was. We just naturally got to sharing a lab-bench, then sharing lunches, and so on. I helped her build her first Darlington Cascade, and she showed me a couple of tricks at knife-fighting, and we got to be friends. We stayed that way a long time." He paused to rub his fingers thoughtfully through his beard. "Just friends, understand. We got patrol-work together once in a while, ran into each other at parties, worked together, balled a few times-- but nothing serious. Not 'til after Chris Pike died, anyway..."

"What happened then?"

"Well, I'd been married too, but my triple broke up. I was at loose ends, and she and Quanna were too, and I already knew Quanna from work, and we got to seeing a lot of each other. One night they invited me over for dinner, and then popped the question on me, and before I realized what I was doing, I said 'yes'. So..." Sparks shrugged and grinned. "Here I am. Never regretted it."

"Old school friends..." Kirk would have asked more, but a round of coughing doubled him up.

"Yeah, pretty much. You want some cough-medicine?"

"No-- *hac*-- not yet. Want to stay awake-- *hac* ...unh, hurts."

"Here, roll over and lemme rub your back." Without waiting for an answer, Sparks pulled back the blankets, tugged off Kirk's shirt, stretched him out on his stomach and began kneading muscles.

... does help... Kirk admitted as Sparks' suprisingly deft hands unkinked sor muscles over his ribs. ...school... Starfleet Academy? So many people I knew there... still don't remember him...

Soft footsteps padded near. Sparks' hands paused. "Jim," said an all-too-familiar voice, "can you sit up and talk for awhile?"

"Sure." Kirk rolled over and pulled himself upright, carefully setting his expression on 'neutral' before turning toward Roantree. "What's the problem?"

"Pennington's pattern of movement, and timing." Roantree sat down beside him and spread out a piece of paper. "This is the best map we can devise of the immediate area. Here's the intersection, the Library, and here's the Pru-Building on the north side of Randolph, east of the intersection, just where the street ramps over the railroad tracks."

"Good map," Kirk conceded, taking it. "Impressively detailed..." There was even a ground-plan of the Prudential Building and the narrow strip of park across the street from it. "Your people have been busy..."

"Since dawn. Now, try to remember everything you did, and especially how much time it took. What street did you arrive on? Where did you leave the car? Exactly where was Pennington when you last saw her?"

Kirk furrowed his forehead in thought, barely noticing as Quannechota sat down beside him and began taking notes. "Here... we came in from the lake shore..." He pointed out Randolph Street. "I don't know what time it was, but the shadow's weren't long enough to notice, and the sun wasn't directly in our eyes, ever. We left the car right here, in the middle of the intersection, facing west. We got out of the car and looked around. Pennington said she wanted to look at the Prudential Building. I agreed, let her go off on her own..." Idiot! "...told her to meet us in the Library in 20 minutes. She agreed-- thanked me, even!-- and started out toward the building. I remember watching her go, for a few seconds anyway, and she headed straight toward it. Then the rest of us went on, into the Library. That was the very last I saw of her."

"How long did the total action take?" Quanna asked, pen poised.

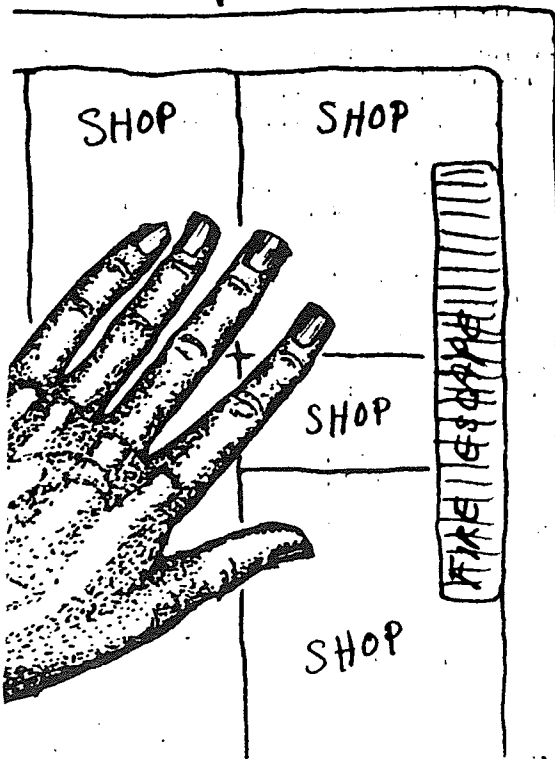
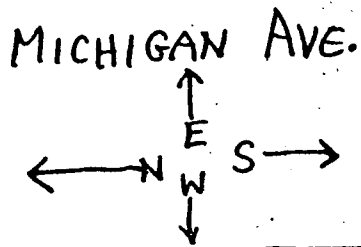
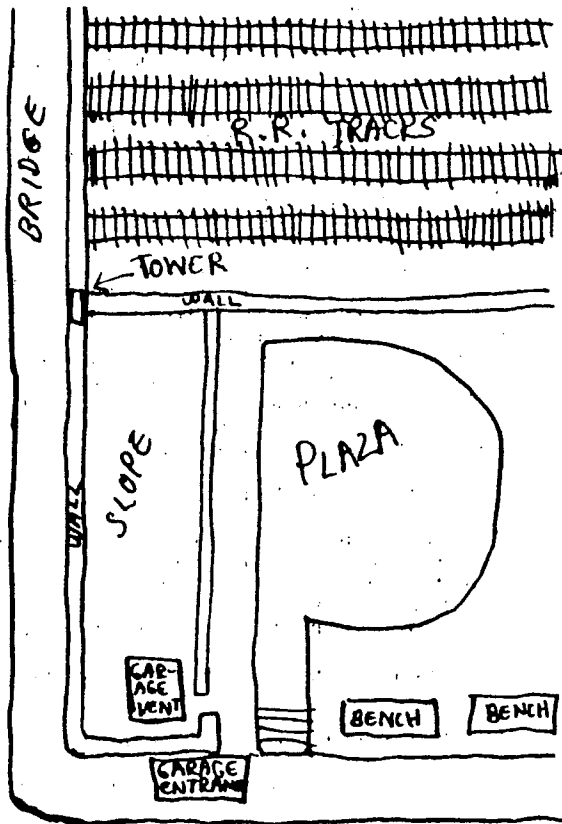
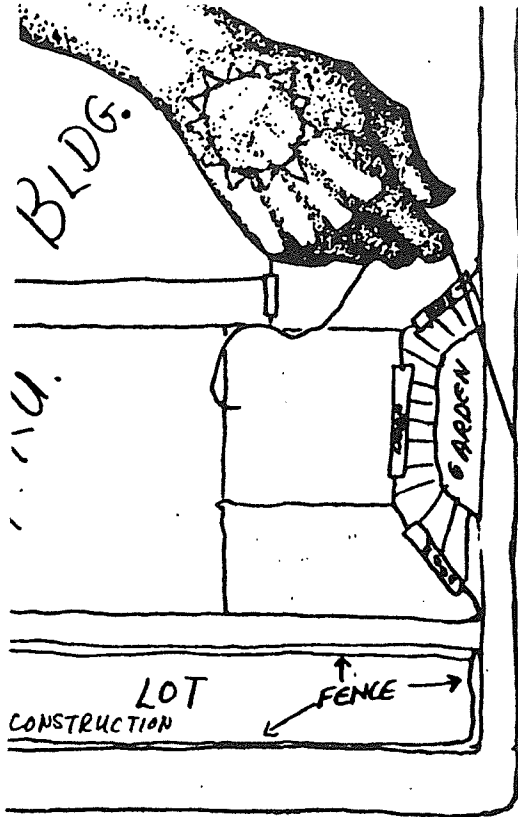
"Hmmm... not more than two minutes, from the time we stopped to my last sight of her."

"Then what happened?"

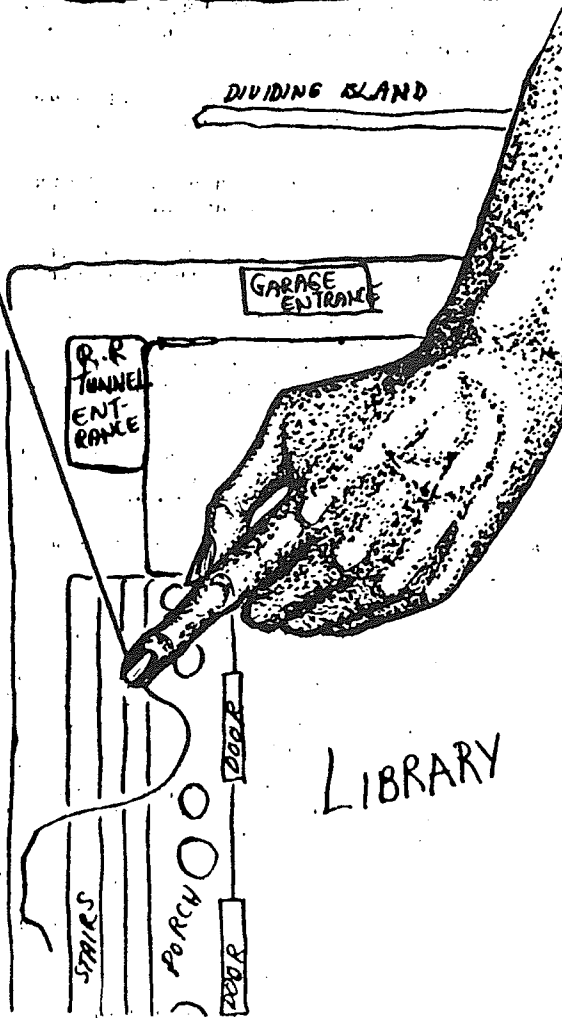
"We hunted up a room that had periodicals-- newspapers: maybe five, ten minutes. We sat down and read some headlines. I didn't get past the first page of one paper: five minutes, I'm not sure... Say 15-20 minutes altogether. Then Scotty called me about the mutiny, and I beamed back to the ship. I left Spock and McCoy there, reading..." Stupid! They died for that stupidity! "On the ship I spent about... m... 10 minutes talking to Scotty, then went to the bridge to make a log entry... another five minutes. I meant to beam back down afterwards, but then Scott learned that Pennington was one of the People for Temporal Control agents. I called Spock and McCoy; they said she was way overdue, missing, and they couldn't find her. I told them to prepare to beam up, told Chekov to use the sensors to find Pennington... Right then, that was when the flood hit." He shivered, and coughed briefly. "Not more than an hour altogether, probably less."

"Not less than 40 minutes, though, since the other Innocents were already looking for her," commented Roantree, studying the time-table laid out in Quannechota's neat, precise copperplate-script handwriting. "We know she escaped the flood, even though she didn't know it was coming-- which nobody knew. She got free of the flood-zone in that amount of time, which means she moved damn fast."

"Had to-- *hac*... She would have known we'd start looking for her after 20 minutes, and we'd use the ship's sensors



RANDOLPH STREET



when we didn't find her right away. She had to get out of their range-- *hac*-- how did she do it?"

"Obviously," Quannechota put in, "she took that car."

"Of course." Kirk wanted to kick himself for not thinking of it first. "She probably sneaked back to it the minute our backs were turned."

"Nah, too risky," said Sparks. "You guys could'a turned around any time and seen her coming back. She had to wait 'til you all went inside, out'a sight."

"That gives us only a few seconds, maybe a minute, to catch her alone," Roantree brooded.

"Not so," said Quannechota. "Consider: she had to wait until she was certain you had gone into the Library, yet she dared not stop to turn and look back for fear that you were watching her. Therefore, she went precisely where she said she would go-- the Prudential Building-- and did not turn to look back until she was safely inside."

"Of course!" Roantree hammered her fist against her knee. "That mutiny-- too neatly timed to have happened without a signal from her-- and she needed a safe place to send it from!"

"That gives us a little more time." Kirk was beginning to feel downright enthusiastic. "Better still, it gives us a piece of evidence that'll convince the others-- certainly Spock. Look, we go ahead and let her send that signal!"

"Huh?" Sparks gulped. "Let those Luddite bastards take over your ship?"

"They didn't take over the ship, just the transporter room. There wasn't enough of them for anything more. It wasn't a real takeover: just an uproar to hide her escape. Scotty quelled it in short order, and it gave away the identity and purpose of the agents. So we let them do it, let Scott catch them, and meanwhile we catch Pennington."

"We can hide people all over the Pru-building," Sparks enthused. "Soon as she sends that signal, we get her."

"It's a big building," grumbled a new voice. The others looked up to see Ann Bailey frowning down at the map. "She could go anywhere in it, and we don't have enough people to hide in every room, even every floor. Besides, how do you know she sent the signal from there? Maybe she just watched until you were out of sight, then took the car, drove it out of earshot, and then sent the signal."

The others said nothing, thinking that over. Quannechota frowned and bent over the map.

"I gotta better idea," Bailey went on. "Why don't we just shoot the bitch the minute the others are out of sight, then get the phaser diagrams off her and use that for the proof?"

Sparks and Roantree looked at each other, and shrugged. They had no objection.

"Wait a minute!" Kirk cut in, horrified. "That would be-- unh, that would be a bit hard to explain to the Inno-- the others. They won't have any proof that you even took the diagram from Pennington. They'll wonder where she is, anyway, and if you tell them that you just killed her, the Captain... I... my earlier self will be... more than a little annoyed."

"Then we should at least try to wait until she sends the signal," Roantree decided. "We'll try to take her alive, but in any case we wait no longer than the minute she gets into that car. We stop her then, whatever it takes, and get the diagrams off her."

"But she could get away from us in the Pru-building maze," Bailey insisted, pointing to the complex ground-plan. "We don't know where she went in there, where to watch her!"

"On the contrary." Quannechota raised her head and fixed Bailey with an expressionless stare. "I can tell you exactly where she went, and will go, in the building. Covering her will require no more than 10 people at most."

"Huh?" Bailey stared. So did the others.

"Consider: Pennington needed an observation point from which to make certain that the Innocents were out of sight, and hearing, or they would have noted the car's departure. Climbing to another floor would have wasted precious time. Note how the ground floor is arranged: the south wall of the building has no windows, and its sole door faces a high construction fence; the front of the building curves inward from the street, behind this small garden, and the front doors are there. I myself have examined those doors, and there is only one from which the Library steps are visible: here, the entrance to the Mid-America National Bank."

Quannechota pulled out one of her long black hairs and stretched it like a plumbline over the map, one end pinned by her thumb to the Library porch. Sure enough, the only possible line of sight that wasn't blocked by walls or stair-well hoods led straight to the front doors of the bank. "I conclude," she finished, "that Pennington went there, and nowhere else."

"Damn," Kirk commented, impressed.

"There are three thick columns beyond the door, where guards may be posted," she continued, "and a short corridor just opposite the entrance, whose doors may be propped open to give a clear line of sight. Also there are three counters and several 'teller-cages' for more cover."

"We could hide a squad in there with no trouble!" Bailey gloated.

"Three should be enough, four at most." There was the slightest edge in Roantree's voice. "You can be one of them if you like. Keep well out of sight, report on where she goes and what she does. Don't shoot unless you absolutely have to. Follow her if need be."

"Fine," Bailey acquiesced. "Where will you be?"

"Deploy the rest around the car," said Kirk. "Hidden well-- *hac*..."

"In all those underground garage entrances," Sparks suggested. "Must be a mother-huge thing. And the train-tunnel entrance near the front steps."

"Behind the low wall around the park," added Roantree. "Just opposite the Pru, and some at the corner near the car."

"Some in empty store-fronts on the opposite corner--"

"Some behind the construction fence in the lot beside the Pru--"

"Try to take her alive," Kirk insisted, "Prove to them-- *hac*-- excuse me-- *hac*-- I"

"Hey Jim, you're bleeding!"

"Quanna, where's the cough-medicine?"

"Here. Jim. can you drink?"

"I can-- *hac*-- give..." Kirk clutched the bottle Quanna handed him and managed to get down several gulps. Sparks held his head up, and the others watched anxiously until the coughing subsided. Quannechota pulled a spare bandanna from her pants-pocket and wiped the blood off his mouth. Kirk sagged in Sparks' arms, eye falling shut, breath steadying. ...hope I didn't take too much, he thought, fading away.

Roantree shook her head and clambered to her feet, folding the map. "Sparks, Quanna, you both better stay with him," she said. "I'll send Jan to relieve you as soon as he's awake. If anything comes up, call me on channel #3."

"Where you goin', Jen?"

"Out to call in the exploration parties and get their reports. At shift-change we'll have the strategy council and tell everyone what we've learned here. After that... Hell, I've got to sleep sometime."

"Yeah," agreed Sparks, turning to his cookstove and spooning out a bowl of stew for Quannechota. "Don't sleep through Judgment Day."

* * *

Visions shifted: black, gray, black, light-shot confusion, black again. Sounds advanced, retreated, droned chaotically, lifted to near-comprehensibility, faded, came back, faded again... the mental universe? ...the country of the dead? No, no, it's too soon!

Bodiless and lonely, Kirk reached out-- blindly straining for some solidity in the shifting non-world. Somewhere in the roiling vagueness he found a firm contact and clutched at it. Feeling returned, the other senses fell into place, and with them came the touch of alien memories in a familiar mind. Jenneth... Jenneth walking through echoing white marble corridors... This time the contact didn't upset him. She was busy with her own thought and senses, grateful to touch this much reality.

She turned a corner and walked down a long divided stairway, cool smooth stone of the thick marble balustrade flowing under her hand. She noticed, with a twinge of nameless feeling, that the top of the balustrade was worn down on one side from the sliding touch of countless long-dead hands, and the marble steps under her feet were slightly hollowed from the passage of numberless feet long before her. The stairway ended in a wide vestibule at the southern door of the Library, approached through a low round arch and then a tall one that reached to the top of the dark-glass windows. The arches too were white marble, but divided into even-spaced rectangles were names, picked out in more green-and-gold mosaic. Roantree flicked on her torch and played it over the archway, noting the names: Homer, Cicero, Virgil and more--- many more names than she recognized. She would have loved to go back to the enormous reading-rooms and the endless rows of bookshelves and look up all those names, see what manner of people they had been and what they had written-- but there was no time for that, not today.

...not in a lifetime. All those books, all that knowledge, all this beauty dedicated to housing and preserving it... and it won't be preserved. It's all to be lost. This time tomorrow, it will lie under light knows how many feet of water, lost forever. Lost knowledge... priceless... 'Jewel Beyond Price', thrown into deep water... No! NO!

She snapped off the light, turned and marched resolutely back up the stairs. Not all, by the gods! her thoughts seethed in something close to fury. I'll save something, some fragment out of this... won't leave this treasure-house empty-handed... She stamped down the wide corridor into the vast rotunda, impatiently kicking dry bones aside, and went straight to the central card-file. She pulled open the wooden drawers and began hunting through the yellowed cards. The hard beta-level humming of her working mind shook off Kirk's tenuous telepathic grip, and he dropped away from her, back into the soft darkness.

* * *

Bailey sat down gingerly on her bedroll, sparing her sore joints as much as possible. ...hurts more with every passing minute... Being argued down at the strategy meeting hadn't helped any. She glowered at the rest of the off-shift crowd, wearily envying them for their supple bodies and the piles of books they'd collected. She'd been too busy for book hunting. "Priceless knowledge," she muttered aloud. "No time to take it. Fine beginning for King Ludd's rule! That Pennington bitch..."

"Pardon," Jean Battré-le-Diable's voice cut across her grumbling. She glowered at him, too. "I have a couple of things here for you." He smiled and held out his surprise: a box and a book.

"What's that?" She eyed the gaudy lettering on the cardboard box. "More work for me?"

"Mais non; it's rheumatism medicine. I found it in one of the shops nearby. Try it. It can't hurt."

Bailey took the box, fumbled it open and found a small bottle full of dark fluid. "Hell, at this point I wouldn't care if it killed me," she admitted, prying off the reluctant cap. "Smells strong enough. What's the book?"

"NASA technical manual." Jean smiled broadly as he held it out.

"Oh!" Bailey almost dropped the bottle in her haste to snatch the book. She pulled back the cover as if it were the veil of a holy relic. "Oh, Lord of Light, not lost... not lost..." She didn't notice as Jean Battre-le-Diable tiptoed away, grinning. "Priceless antique..." A twinge at her elbow reminded her to try the rheumatism medicine. She dabbed it gingerly on one complaining joint, then another, then on every one she could reach without undressing. "Damn, it does work!" she marvelled, "and this is an antique, too..." How much better have they got it in Jim's universe? We can have that... progress, knowledge, treasures beyond dreams... I might live to be 70, even 80... She turned back to the book, feeling much more kindly toward this city, and Jim Kirk, and whatever brave new universe he was leading them into. If he's telling the truth, she reminded herself. Only if it's really true.

* * *

Time passed and waves of sleep withdrew, leaving a distant consciousness of nagging pain and dreadful weakness. Kirk lay quiet in the blankets, vaguely aware of his body and surroundings, unable to move or open his eye, just barely able to hear and think. Familiar voices spoke in soft counterpoint nearby, and he turned his fogged attention toward them.

"... 'tension and strife within the family', that's what the cards said," murmured Sparks' voice. "That describes Bailey's squabbling pretty well. Maybe the war-council is all it meant."

"Perhaps," said Quanna, voice level as always. "Yet she may change her mind and be contented when the waiting ends, as she often does. The omens suggest a different interpretation. By cards or stones or psi-trance, the message is always the same: my husband will die."

...makes sense... Kirk accepted it quietly. Heavy odds for it...

Sparks sighed. "I'll admit it's damn likely. I'm no medic, and even I can see that he's on his last legs. He'll live through what needs doing tomorrow, but after that the gods only know..." Another pause and a shuffling of gear. "What will you do when he's dead, Quanna? Will you come back to us?"

Kirk flinched, hot acids of outrage and denial sweeping some of the sluggishness out of his veins.

"Where else should I go?" said Quannechota. "Even when time comes right, when our dead are alive again, and our city restored, and all the treasures of Science at our hands, still, who else would there be? I would not choose to be alone, even in Paradise."

Don't leave me! Kirk wanted to shout at her.

"Then it'll be all right again?" Sparks asked, almost timidly. "We'll be like we were before? Maybe even better, the way we hoped it'd be when we were married, what I was looking for after the Johanssen marriage broke up... Y'know, if I hadn't been hitched to them when I first met Jen and you, I'd have married you both before Chris Pike did. I swear, I loved you and Jen even then; we just couldn't get serious about it, me bein' already committed, but I wanted to..."

"I know."

Wait a minute... Kirk was momentarily sidetracked. 'Johanssen'... That rings a bell. Married Johanssen... met Jen-
neth-- me-- at school... can't quite... something's missing.

"But he might not die, Quanna. In his universe, they could probab-- are what's wrong with him. Will you stay with him then?"

"He has a lover there, so he may not want me. But if he does, I will stay with him."

...Vanderhoof... Vander... Helen Vander-- Helen Vander?! Him?!? But he's nothing like Helen... no, wait a minute. Take away the beard and...



"But why? He can't give you healthy kids."

"There is a chance of that, if I go to the Vulcan Science Academy."

...imagine Sparks female... big, hefty, merry eyes, pratical joker, good at Communications... Omigod, it IS possible!

"If you go? Not him? You mean they could clear up your trouble? But then you could have good kids with anyone, even me! So why stay with him?"

"If he wants me to stay..."

...Helen has blonde hair, but that could have come from a bottle... Gary Mitchell called her 'cute' and 'little' but he said that about every attractive woman shorter than himself, and he was tall... she was short only compared to him... he aimed her at me for a joke, but I took it seriously...

"Quanna, do you love him?"

"...yes, I believe I do."

...I almost married Helen, and the break-up was bad-- I almost married her! And Jenneth-- him-- they did-- But she married Johanssen instead... Sparks married Johanssen first, then broke up... Oh God... Sparks Vanderhooh... Helen Vander Johanssen. Now I know. All these years I might have been... a wife and kids.. family...

"So unless he tells you to leave, which ain't bloody likely, you'll stay with him while he's alive..." Sparks heaved a monumental sigh. "I like him, you know. I... don't want to wish he would die."

Kirk heard that part. If his ears had been mobile, they would have pricked up and quivered.

"I wish I were not in this position," Quanna answered quietly. "Surely you know I have no wish to hurt you."

"I know, I know!" the Big Radioman almost cried. "Things just happened that way! If only I could've given you good kids, if only we could've done it that way, if only--"

"Sparks, there is no point to this."

There was a sound of slow fingers running through coarse hair, a faint sound that might have been a sob, then a creak and shuffle as Sparks got up and moved a short distance away.

After a while Quanna got up, too. "No point to this," she repeated gently. "I have to take my turn as sentry. You should sleep."

"Yeah."

"Good night, Sparks."

"G'night, Quan."

Footsteps padded away on the thick carpet. After a time, Sparks approached Kirk's bedroll. His steps seemed too slow, too deliberate. Kirk struggled frantically against his dragging weakness, trying to pull his eye open and come fully awake. He succeeded just as he felt Sparks pull back the blankets and reach for him. Sparks was bending over him with such a look of hopeless grief and anger on his face that Kirk was sure he intended murder.

"Tomorrow!" Kirk gasped at him. "Just wait until I've done what I came here for! You can kill me tomorrow, but let me finish my job!"

Sparks snatched his hands back so fast that three hot-water canteens bounced out of the bedroll. Too late, Kirk saw that all Sparks had been trying to do was check the heat of the canteens.

"Do you think that too?" Sparks whispered, horrified. "I could see Bailey asking, but you... if you... maybe everybody thinks..." He squeezed his eyes shut and rocked from side to side.

"Sparks, I'm sorry! I didn't mean it. I was only half awake, having bad dreams..." Kirk pulled up one arm and reached for Sparks, but the Radioman didn't see it. "No, no, I didn't think that! I know you wouldn't... wouldn't even think of it..." Damn! Damn! Damn! When will I learn? They don't even know what jealousy is... or didn't until I taught it to them... corrupter... "Sparks, please, I know I can trust you."

"Y-yeah. Sure." Sparks patted Kirk clumsily, not really looking at him, and scrabbled the canteens out of the bedroll. He dragged them off to the camp-stove and busied himself with reheating the water, but Kirk thought he saw the broad shoulders shake a couple of times. It took several minutes to heat the water, and Kirk used the time to silently call himself every dirty name he could think of-- with particular emphasis on variations of 'stupid'. When Sparks came back with the hot canteens his face was calm again, and he tucked them under the blanket with the same gentle care as always. Like a patient bear with one sickly, fretful cub, Kirk thought. He made the effort to smile and catch Sparks' nearer hand. "Hey,

thanks," he whispered. "Look, I hate needing it, but I really am grateful for the way you're taking care of me."

Almost shyly, Sparks smiled back. "Ah, that's all right." He turned his hand over to grip Kirk's thin fingers, and his expression changed to something more thoughtful. "Y'know," he said, "if I could take your place in this, I would."

"Huh?"

"Nah, nothing. You go back to sleep. Tomorrow's a busy day."

What the hell did he mean by that? Kirk wondered as he drifted back toward oblivion.

* * *

"Leve-toi, Braider!" called an abominably cheerful voice. "Wake up! It's dawn, last day of the world!" A booted toe, apparently attached to the voice, nudged Roantree insistently in the ribs.

Roantree opened her eyes and groaned. "All right, Jean, I'm awake. Cut it out." The kicking stopped. Roantree lifted her wrist to study her battered chronometer, groaned again, and dragged herself out of her bedroll. "Oh mother, so little sleep... Jean, tell the others we've got to pack everything, leave no trace, get out of here and into position within the hour. The Innocents mustn't find anything unusual."

"It's already started. The people on the last shift have moved their gear out to the ambush-points. This crowd is all that's left."

"Good, good..." Roantree pulled on her boots and turned to fold up her bedroll. "Are there any camp-stoves left? I'd give my left arm for a hot cup of tea."

On the word, Sparks came up with a steaming mug. Jean moved off to pack his own gear. Roantree gulped the thick tea gratefully and nibbled on a granola wafer while Sparks helped stuff her gear into her backpack. "Thanks, Sparks," she mumbled, draining the cup. "Is Jim awake yet?"

"Quanna's pouring the wide-awake medicine down him." Sparks took the empty cup and sat back on his heels, wearing an odd expression. "He doesn't look at all good, Jen."

"Just let him last a few more hours." Roantree hitched her 12-string and bedroll onto the pack and pulled the whole assemblage onto her shoulders. "Less than nine hours, and this'll all be over." She picked up her shotgun and checked the spare shells in her belt-pouch, shoved the telescope in one hip-pocket and her ship's communicator in the other. "Better pack up, then," she said, "but leave the stove for last, just in case Jim can eat something."

"All done, already." Sparks looked away. "All done."

Roantree glanced at him, noticing that he'd combed out his hair and beard very carefully, and was wearing his antique Foreign Legion kepi at a jaunty angle on the back of his head. He didn't look like someone who'd been camping out for two days. Odd, she thought. He's never been vain before... Spruced up for the big event? "You look gorgeous today," she said, leaning forward to kiss him. To her surprise, he hugged her very hard and kissed back as if it were the last time ever, "Whoof! Let me breathe!" she laughed, coming up for air.

"Sure," he said, almost absently patting her on the back as he stepped away from her. His attention had shifted, for some reason, to his own reflection in the dark glass of the reading-room doors.

Roantree shrugged, knowing that Sparks in one of his moods could be twice as mysterious as Quannechota, and walked over to the foot of the stairs. A last tri-magnesite torch flickered low at the top of the tall end-post, casting bluish shadows into the hollows of Kirk's cheeks as he slowly emptied his cup of soup. He was washed and fully dressed, and someone--probably Quanna--had combed the tangles out of his long gray-streaked hair. Roantree crouched beside him, studying the paleness of his stark-boned face, the faint shivering of his sharp-corded hands, not at all liking the way he looked. Sparks

had understated, if anything; Kirk looked half dead. He noticed her expression, smiled reassuringly and finished the soup as fast as he could.

"Jim," Quanna asked again as she helped him into his jacket, "have you had any further success at remembering the time that Pennington arrived?"

"No," he panted, clutching the end-post as he struggled to his feet. "Late morning, early afternoon... I can't be more specific than that. Where's the tape-case?" Quanna handed it to him, and he hitched it onto his shoulder. "Phew, it's cold! I don't remember it being this cold."

"That's not the weather, Jim. It's you." Roantree pulled the silver thermal blanket out of the bedroll and tied it cape-fashion around his shoulders. "That help any?"

"Yes. Much better." He shivered, but not with cold this time. His heartbeat was picking up, pulse medium-fast and heavy; he felt much stronger, but tense and fragile and jittery. "Ah, the medicine's taking hold. Hope it lasts. Let's go look over the area."

He checked his phaser and communicator, ignored the arm that Roantree offered, and marched regally-- if a bit unsteadily-- to the doors. Quanna watched him go, sighed, and stuffed his shotgun into her own pack. Roantree strolled out after him, trying to look nonchalant.

There was no sign of the other Anarchists outside until Kirk came down the steps; then two wide-eyed faces peered at him from under the shadowy entrance to the train station, and one of them murmured something about the 'King of Winter'. Kirk smiled and nodded to them as he passed, wondering briefly what he must look like in that long silvery cape and glittering Crown-of-Mirrors.

"Hey! Hey!" called a few voices from across the street. Kirk turned and saw hair-framed faces peering from broken doors of shops, from the darkened alley, from the fire-escape on the second floor, and from around the west corner of the Library. Well deployed, he thought, smiling and waving to the expectant faces. Pass in review, Anarchist style! He moved on to the corner, glanced south-- then crossed the street and plodded northward up the bone-strewn sidewalk. More Anarchists announced themselves from windows and doorways of store-fronts. Satisfied, he crossed the broad empty avenue and plodded south again beside the worn wooden fence.

Here ancient graffiti still blazed their messages to the indifferent air: "Abortion Kills Babies!", "Illegal Abortion Kills Women-- No More Coathangers!", "Get the Shah Out of Iran!" Puzzled by that last one, Kirk stopped and idly rapped his knuckles on the tottery wooden fence. An unseen Anarchist on the other side obligingly rapped back. Kirk laughed and walked on. As he rounded the corner and turned east on Randolph he saw a knothole in the fence, conveniently near eye-level, and paused to look through it. An eye looked back. Kirk straightened so abruptly that he almost bumped into Roantree, just a step behind.

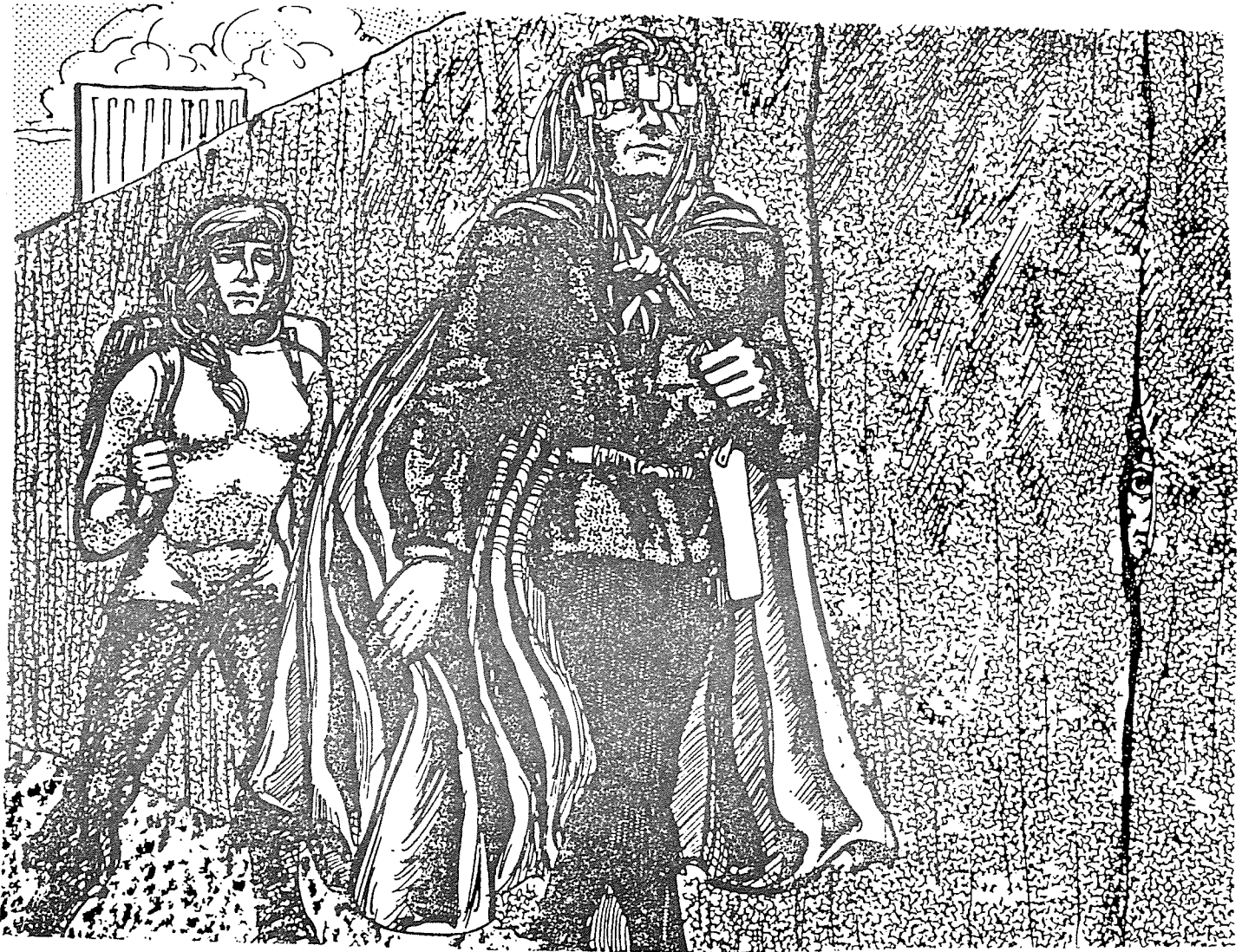
He walked on, heart beginning to pound, up the rising street toward the Prudential Building. Sure enough, the near wall was windowless, blind. He paced around the inset walk, pausing to look back toward the Library from every inset door and nodding politely to the Anarchists stationed behind them. Not until he reached the last door did the front of the Library become visible. "She couldn't have stood anywhere else," he murmured. "Quanna was right."

He turned to look through the glass door and saw Ann Bailey looking back, shotgun in hand, actually smiling at him. Pleased and a little surprised, he waved. She smiled and waved back. Good ~~omen~~, he thought, pulling out his communicator and flipping it open. The Anarchists did likewise.

"Use channel #3," Roantree suggested.

"I think they were set for channel #1 when we came here the first time."

"Precisely."



"Oh." Kirk turned the dial, wincing at the faint feed-back whine that came through from the speaker.^{VC} All 40 of them must be listening... Good. "All right, everybody; from now on, leave your communicators open-- channel #3-- but don't talk through them unless you have to. Don't do anything -- anything-- to let Pennington know we're here until she leaves the building and goes back to the car. We stop her then, not before. Does everybody understand that?"

"Sure, just as we agreed." Bailey's voice was, for once, without a grumble in it. "But what if she doesn't go back to the car? What if she tries to go somewhere else?"

"Then you stop her," Kirk sighed. "Don't kill unless you absolutely have to, but stop her. Kirk out." He put the communicator back on his belt and crossed the street. Behind him, Roantree and Bailey studied each other briefly through the glass door.

Here the road arched up over the weed-grown railriad tracks, bright orange stripes of rust muffled in sickly green. The ramp was bordered by a concrete wall, interrupted by a low white tower that Jean Battre-le-Diable was trying to climb.

"Get down from there," Kirk demanded. "You'll break your neck."

"I'll have you know," Jean started to complain, "that I've been climbing steeples since I was--"

"Jean," Roantree put in, "they'll be able to see you. Where could you hide up there? How could you get down fast?"

"Uhhh..."

"Now what you could do is go on across the bridge to the other side of the tracks and hide behind the fence over there. You'll be much better hidden, and you'll still be the first to see them coming."

"Oh, oui, I can." The little biologist scrambled back to the safety of the sidewalk and scampered off across the bridge. "I'll find a good place," he promised over his shoulder. "I'll let you know the minute I see them!"

"Com back after they've passed, but be careful not to let them see you..." Roantree called after him. "...you granstand showoff," she added as he passed out of sight over the crest of the bridge.

Kirk walked further down the ramp, glanced over the retaining wall and found himself face-to-face with Quannechota. She raised an eyebrow at his startled look, handed him his forgotten shotgun, and reported, "The others are in place. Sparks in the garage entrance nearest the Library. There is a very good place at this corner, behind the wall, and no one else has taken it."

"Ah, you mean you saved the best seat for us!" Roantree laughed. "You'll stay here, then?"

"Yes, just opposite the bank door. Give me your telescope."

Roantree handed it to her, took Kirk by the elbow and steered him down to the corner. Yes, more people hidden behind those benches... There's another entrance to that damned underground garage; more people in it, and it's facing the wrong way, but we can hop into it if there's rain while we're waiting. As good as duck-blind. Heh!"

"Dammit, Jenneth, this isn't a duck-hunt! And let go of me-- I can walk! I don't like the way you're taking this business. You're treating Pennington as if she were some sort of-- of game for you to shoot at, instead of a pool benighted fool with delusions of grandeur. She's a human being, remember?"

"So was Hitler." Roantree gave him an impatient look. "'Humanity' covers a wide range, Jim; monsters as well as saints. What do your people do with the Bad Guys? Ignore 'em?"

"We don't shoot them." Kirk stopped at the corner and surveyed the fateful intersection. It looked as quiet, empty, skeleton-strewn and depressing as it had that first day, nine terrible months ago. There was no sign that more than 40 shaggy potential assassins were hidden there, lying in wait for four blissfully ignorant strangers. Ambush! A damned good one. "You don't have to kill," he insisted. "What we do is take the sick ones and put them in hospitals, where they can be treated."

"I wasn't talking about crazies; I was asking about the sons of bitches who go around robbing and killing and enslaving people-- the kind who won't quit it, won't make restitution to their victims, won't do anything but go on victimizing. We exile or shoot them. What do your people do? What would you have done with Hitler, or Stalin, or Khan, or--"

"Khan!" Kirk laughed. "Funny you should mention him! I have news for you, Jenneth; he didn't die in the Eugenics Wars. He and his friends escaped on a sleeper-ship into deep space."

"What? Where did he go? What happened to him?"

"I met him myself, a couple years back... actually a couple centuries in the future..." Kirk smiled, remembering. "I personally beat the crap out of him."

"You did?" Roantree whooped. "You? Hey, my brother the tyrant-killer!" She hugged him. He gasped at the pressure.

"Are you sure you're not making that up?" asked a voice through Roantree's open communicator. "Sounds like a mighty tall story to me."

"No, it's true, dammit!" Kirk insisted. "Check the ship's log when we get back."

"Keep it down, in any case! Quiet out there!" yelled half a dozen more voices. "You guys want to wake up half the town?"

"We're not sorcerors that we can wake the dead," Roantree laughed back, kicking a skeleton for emphasis; but she did step over the wall and sit down, and lower her voice. "For truth, Jim? You really did beat the crap out of Killer Khan? What happened after that?"

"Well, we beamed him and his followers down to an uninhabited planet." Kirk slid over the wall and sat down beside her, resting his back against the concrete. "It was a fierce world, full of volcanoes and dinosaurs, enough to keep them busy. Also, I didn't tell them this, it was a world very poor in surface metals. They won't get off that planet without help, and-- knowing their reputation-- who's going to help them?"

"Heh! Heh! Wonderful!" Roantree chuckled. "Yes, we exile Bad Guys too, if it's at all possible. If they keep coming back to cause trouble, then we shoot 'em. Must be handy, having a lot of places where you can dump the Bad Guys and be sure they won't come back to bother you. But what would your people do with Pennington if you brought her back alive, with proof of what she did-- or tried to do?"

"Hell, probably send her off to a rehabilitation center to have her head rearranged."

"A what center? Do what? Jim, 'rehabilitation' used to be a cover-up word for brain-washing! You can't mean that."

"Uh, oh no, of course not..." But I saw it done! Tantalus V... but Dr. Adams wasn't typical; he was a meglomaniac. Rehab centers don't brainwash people... What DO they do, exactly? ...no, don't get into that with her now. "I mean, some sort of insane asylum. Pennington would have to be crazy to do something like that-- destroy Earth's main stronghold of Science, hand over the galaxy to the Romulans... That's insane, isn't it?"

"I'm not sure." Roantree rubbed the bridge of her nose. "Maybe she did it for power, or revenge. Anyway, crazy or not, dangerous is dangerous. Harmless crazy people you can put in a hospital and try to cure, but the dangerous ones... Hell, put 'em away, and they're likely to take over the asylum! Then what?"

"Funny you should mention that..." Kirk shivered and pulled the silver blanket-cape a little tighter around him.

"Don't tell me! That happened to you too?"

"Right. It took us quite a bit of time and effort to get the patients back under wraps and ourselves out of there. I'll admit it was a difficult mess to straighten out. But there wasn't that much danger. They were all too obviously crazy to have survived long, even if they'd managed to get off that planet..." Am I sure? If Garth had gotten that password, beamed up to the ship disguised as me... No, he wouldn't have lasted long. Roger Corby's android didn't. Janice Lester didn't... No, masquerades aren't enough... not in working, not in daily living, especially not in a crises. Personality shows. Nobody's me but me!

"Maybe not." Roantree pulled off her pack. "It must be nice to have moons and asteroids and whole planets that you can exile dangerous people on, and leave them safely stuck. We weren't so lucky. We didn't even have inescapable islands or mountains. All we could do was drive them away and promise to shoot them if they ever came back."

"Sure. And after awhile it becomes easier to shoot them right away and be done with it! Don't you see where that leads? Right back to the bad old days of executing people, killing them for practically everything. It's convenient, but it's cruel. Can't you see that?"

"Huh? Jim, what are you talking about? One thing doesn't lead to another unless people wanted to be lead there all the time. Besides, the whole point of dealing with incurable Bad Guys is to make them leave you alone. The cheapest, easiest, most convenient way to do that is to run them out of town and tell them not to come back. Most of the time, they'll have the sense to go away and stay away, so you don't have to shoot them unless they show up again. Shoots are cheaper than bullets. Besides, as somebody who's had to do a lot of it, I can tell you that killing is no pleasure. At best, it's only relief. At worst, it's sickening."

"In that case, why are you all so eager to shoot Pennington?"

"Because this is just the opposite, Jim. We're not trying to drive her away, we're trying to keep her from getting away. If she runs off with the phaser diagram, it'll ruin the whole world. It's as if she were a plague-carrier, or a rabid dog. I've already told you how we deal with rabid dogs."

"Mad dog, mad bitch-- what's the difference?" crackled Sparks voice through the open communicator. Kirk flinched. He'd forgotten that everyone was listening. "We'll spare her if we can," Sparks went on. "We promised you that. But we're gonna stop her, no matter what. That's what we came here for."

"Right. Right on," murmured several more voices.

"Just try not to kill," Kirk surrendered. "That's all I'm asking. Try."

While the mixed voices promised compliance, he slid away from the wall and stretched out on the soft grass. He settled his shotgun beside him, nestled the tape-carrier into the crook of his arm and set the open communicator near his head where he could hear it easily. The sun was high now, the air and ground growing pleasantly warm, and he felt he could profit from a few minutes' light doze; he needed to keep the jitteryness under control, and though he wasn't sleepy he did feel a scratchy need to do some dreaming. Roantree resettled herself against the concrete foundation of the garage-entrance, using her loaded backpack as a cushion, and took out her canteen. She offered it to Kirk, but he shook his head, shut his eye and let himself drowse.

Little by little the voices on the communications net died away to patient silence, and soon it was so quiet he could hear the distant waves of Lake Michigan. He heard Roantree rustling her pack, wondered what she was doing, and slipped effortlessly into contact with her mind. She was pulling out three books, old yellow volumes looted from the Library, admiring them sadly and brushing the last dust from their pages. He puzzled over her choice: "Moby Dick" by Melville, illustrated and unabridged; "God and the State" by Bakunin, annotated; "The Age of Turmoil, a Comprehensive History of the 20th century" by Lee, Carson and Paciello, annotated, illustrated, and so thick that Jenneth's hand could hardly close around it. Hey, that one's valuable! Kirk thought sharply. All our surviving historical accounts got fragmented and confused after mid-century. You've got to show that to my people when we get back...

Sure. Glad to. Roantree gave him the mental equivalent of a playful shove. Now quit knocking around in my head and get some sleep.

Rest, anyway... Kirk agreed, feeling his mind slip off into absorption with her printed treasures. He let his own mind wander. Warm sun... soft grass... no sound of birds, though... birds... there were lots of birds, tweeting and tooting in every tree, the last time I saw Bones... McCoy of Jenneth's Earth...

He cringed at the edge of the memory, but the old grief wasn't as bad now as it had been. He sighed and let himself go on with it, ride it though, think it over for the first time in months. ...took us days to find him... He was sitting in a swing on the veranda, shoes off, nursing a mint julep... big sliver of ice in the glass, fresh from the cold-cellar, still had a little sawdust on it. Bees busy in the honeysuckle... whine of a fiddle from indoors... his daughter, Jo, he said... pride and contentment so obvious... he'd just come back from delivering a baby and a calf on the same morning. He didn't recognize me, of course. Kirk dug his fingers into the long grass, riding a spasm of old pain and loneliness.

??? A polite, wordless question from Roantree.

Oh, Jen, he was so happy there! Kirk wailed silently. Much happier than he'd been on the Enterprise... Just an old country doctor, and content with it. When time comes right, he'll lose that!

"He's probably lost it already," Jenneth replied aloud. "When the Romulans took Earth, do you think they left him utterly untouched?"

I don't know... Kirk tried to imagine Earth under Romulan rule, particularly McCoy's native Georgia. He couldn't do it. He couldn't imagine that universe's McCoy other than the way he'd seen him last, sitting on that porch swing among the

honeysuckle, talking kindly to the man he took to be a stranger. ...an escapee from some strict religious community to the north, some strange sect that didn't believe in teaching history... Implausible story. Don't know whether he believed it or not, but he told me what I wanted to know... and he saw that I was upset. "Jes' bear in mind," he told me, "that whatever harm you've done can be made up for, one way or 'nuther." I wanted to believe him... I thought that meant staying on the ship, guarding Earth from invasion, while the crew set up the ground colony... Then Jenneth's people showed me this way back, and now it's almost done. Bones, I wish you could hear me! I've almost made it up, all of it, and I'm on my way home... I'm coming home...

Words drifted out of his mind, and it seemed that he was swimming in long even strokes through a warm red-gold sea, warm and red-gold as sunlight, shining through his closed eyelids. Eyelids? He wasn't sure if he had one or two, whether he was lying flat or sitting upright, whether the slight constriction across his chest was the result of nagging sickness or a kerchief-cloth halter. Jenneth, he thought, hey Jenneth, don't fall asleep. You have to keep watch for me.

"I'm not asleep," she murmured, "just daydreaming."

What about?

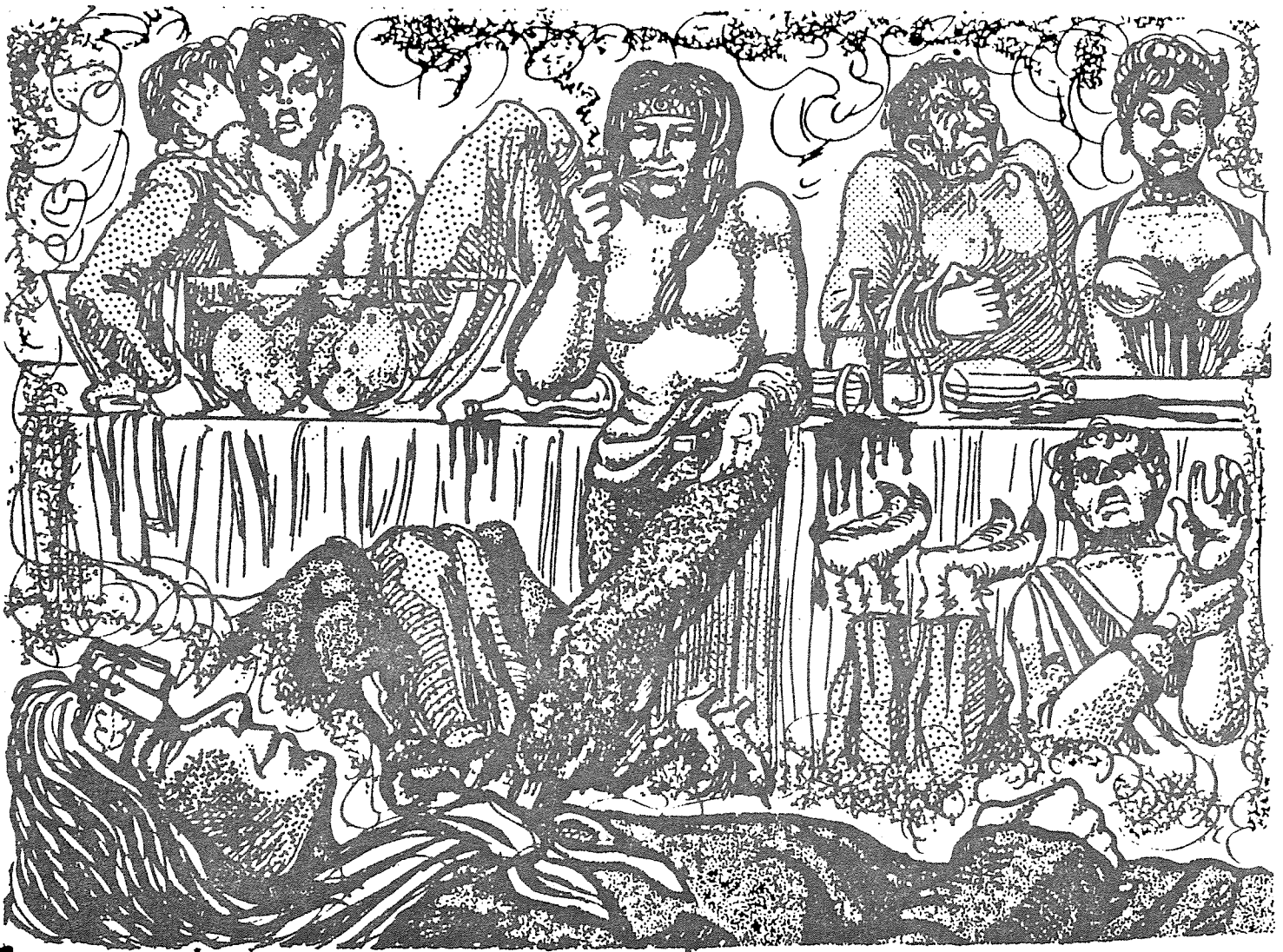
"Having a ship like yours."

He laughed silently, cheered to recognize that part of himself in her. He felt her hand reach out to pat him, and he took it, no longer afraid of the contact. It's harmless, sisterly... when I bring home my new sister it'll confound my friends... and relatives... and enemies... let her loose on people I don't like... Aunt Helen, Cousin Max, Starfleet bureaucrats, Janice Lester... Oh, I would love to see that! Sic 'em, Jenny! Eat 'em up! Go get all those bitches and bastards I could never get my hands on...

He laughed again, carefully setting the scene in his mind: on of those terribly formal, dull, itchy-uncomfortable, full-dress Society gatherings that were the bane of his working life, populated by everybody he'd ever hated with an unsatisfied passion. There was Janice Lester, and Admiral Komack, and Finnegan, T'Pring somewhere in the background, a clutch of nastier Platonians, a well-known Tellerite or two, assorted unloved relatives and desperately-hated teachers-- a room-full of personal Bad Guys, set up and waiting for the kill. Then in came Jenneth, straight from a hard day's field-work, her clothes wet and reeking metallically with sweat and her boots an inch thick with dust-- no, make that mud-- which she tracked cheerfully onto the carpet. In she came in like a good-natured bull into the proverbial china-shop, marched straight to the bar and demanded a tankard of beer from the startled steward, then rolled amiably into the crowd to lay them to waste. Admiral Komack barked an order at her; she smiled, and pured her beer over his head. A certain nasty drill-instructor rattled off some air-scorching obscenities at her; she coolly replied with a barnyard enormity that sent him running away in tears. Aunt Helen came up and made a cutting remark; Jenneth picked up another drink and pured it down Aunt Helen's décolletage. Finnegan came up and said something clumsily teasing; Jenneth smiled demurely and kicked him in the crotch. T'Pring approached and made a sneering comment about Human emotionalism; Jenneth inclined her head politely, kept her face impassive, ripped off T'Pring's dress and threw it into the punch-bowl-- then, as an afterthought, threw T'Pring into the punch-bowl after it. A couple bureaucrats ran up, jabbering and waving pieces of paper; Jenneth took the papers, twisted them into a tight stick, and lit her pipe with them. Janice Lester trotted up, nattering about how terrible it was to be a helpless woman and how disgusting men were; Jenneth decked her with a fast uppercut and dropped her on top of Finnegan. Cousin Max waddled up and pulled one of Jenneth's braids; she picked him up and drop-kicked him into the punch-bowl on top of T'Pring. A Platonian grabbed Jenneth in his telekinetic grip and tried to pull her toward him; she grabbed the nearest Tellerite and threw him ahead of her, and while the Platonian was busy keeping the squealing Tellerite from falling on him, Jenneth grabbed another Tellerite and threw him after the first. All three collapsed in a noisy heap, the Platonian screaming about a cut finger. Just then Spock and McCoy came in and stopped to observe the proceedings. Spock raised an elegant eyebrow and murmured, "I was not aware that this gathering included entertainment." McCoy raised both eyebrows and asked, "Have I missed the whole floor-show?" Kirk laughed until his sides hurt.

"You know, Jim," RoanTree's voice chuckled from somewhere outside the daydream, "your body may be in bad shape, but your mental health sure seems to be improving."

Kirk pulled his eye open, grinned at her, and squeezed her hand. "Go get 'em, Tiger," he whispered. "We could have a lot of fun together, in my universe."



"Heh! I don't doubt it. You set 'em up and I knock 'em down, eh? But who is 'Ameril Comakk', and why do you call them 'bureaucrats'?"

"Attention!" Jean Battre-le-Diable's voice screeched through the open communicator. "Ills approchent! I saw something moving, down there under the trees!"

Kirk jumped as if he'd been bee-stung. He grabbed his shotgun and communicator, rolled over, clutched the low wall and scrambled to his knees.

"Are you sure?" snapped several voice simultaneously, including Roantree's as she dropped to her knees beside Kirk. "Is it them? Can you see? Is it really a car?"

"Yes! Yes! Par tous les dieux," Jean hissed, voice sinking to an urgent whisper. "It's a car; I can see several shapes in it. It's coming this way, fast. Signing off!" Everyone heard the snap of his communicator closing.

From all over the intersection came a soft wave of mixed sound; breaths drawn, clothing rustling, boots creaking, shotgun hammers clicking. The noise passed in an instant, leaving the street silent again, still as death, waiting.

Oh God, Kirk thought, resting his cheek against the chill concrete. Please please don't let anyone jump the gun... don't fire too early, don't spring the trap until she's in it! He was shaking very hard, and his heart was slamming itself to pieces at the base of his throat. "Wait," he whispered into the communicator. "Wait until they go inside. Wait. Wait..." No voice replied, save in quiet multiple breathing.

A ragged hum filled the air, growing louder. It took Kirk a few seconds to recognize it for what it was; the sound of an automobile engine. He wasn't sure how close it was, and started to raise his head to look, but Jenneth pulled him down again. --raw amateur kid's mistake; she thought fiercely at him. The sound roared loud in his ears as he tried to flatten himself against the wall.

"They are passing the corner now," Quannechota's voice whispered through the communicator. "Stay low. Entering intersection. Halting..."

The sound of the engine died, its last echo rebounding from the stone buildings and reverberating down the empty street. Knowing they were safely past him now, Kirk raised his head just enough to peer over the wall. He watched while the doors opened and the occupants climbed awkwardly out of the ancient vehicle.

For an instant they didn't seem real. They were strangers, aliens, these people in the yellow, blue and red shirts, the tall man with the pointed ears and the woman with no pants on. He felt Roantree's hand on his back and realized that he was seeing them through her mind, through the eyes of an Anarchist. He shook her hand away.

Then, at last, the shock of recognition came. It hit him like a tidal wave, a whirlwind of conflicting feelings he couldn't begin to analyze, and could barely endure. Spock, Bones, alive and well and solid and real... A sob caught in his throat, and he bit his lip to hold it back. The next figure: Pennington... I'd forgotten the bitch was pretty... A polite, sweet, false smile was plastered on her unrevealing face-- so precise, so neat, so phony, that his fist itched to smash it. He wanted to grab her and beat her to a pulp, break every bone in her treacherous body, or just pull out his phaser and blow her to atoms-- but that wasn't part of the plan, and she was too close to the others. In fact, she was talking to the Captain while she pointed toward the Prudential Building. Kirk knew exactly what she was saying; he'd heard those words over and over in his dreams, and he despised the fool who'd listened to them. Him. The other me... He looked at the profile of that broad, handsome, slightly chubby face turned toward Pennington and he was shaken by such a storm of grief, fury and shame that he had to drop back under the wall and dig his teeth into his arm to keep quiet. Behind him he heard the voices chatting innocently, the other Captain saying, "All right, Yeoman. Meet us in the Library in 20 minutes."

No! No! No, you fool! he wanted to howl. Roantree's hand fell warningly on his arm.

"Thank you, sir!" gushed Pennington.

Kirk wondered why that gold-shirted idiot out there couldn't hear the obvious gloating in her voice, or the eagerness in her racketing steps as she hurried back up the rising street. He heard the others turn and walk toward the Library, their footfalls oddly loud. Pennington's bootheels clacked like gunfire past his position. Ready... He checked his shotgun, making sure it was loaded, and noticed Roantree doing the same. Whispers softer than the wind wounded through the communicator.

Sparks' voice: "They're comin' to the Library. 30 yards... 25... 20..."

Bailey: "We see her. All in place. Quiet."

Quannechota: "She approaches the Pru-Building. 40 yards to the doors... 35... 30..."

Jean Battre-le-Diable: "I'm coming! Wait for me... Don't worry, I'm keeping well down..."

Roantree: "Way the hell down, Jean! Don't come over the crest until she goes back to the car."

"They've started into the Library."

"Here she comes. Sh..."

"She has entered the garden area... pausing to glance over her shoulder... approaching the bank doors..."

"Je suis a bas. Can't see a thing. What's happening?"

"Get ready, Jim."

Kirk settled into a combat-ready crouch beside Roantree. The shotgun fitted into his hands as snugly as if he'd been using it all his life. He noticed that his teeth had left marks in the gold braid on his sleeve; the hard sunlight picked them out in bold shadows.

"She stopped at the front pair of doors!" Bailey whispered. "She's not coming all the way in... just turned around and looking back... watching... seems to be counting to herself... now she's going out. She's out! Move! Move! Arggh! Quietly, you clods!"

"40 yards to the car," droned Quanna. "...35..."

"Wait... wait..." Kirk whispered tightly, listening to the approaching rattle of bootheels. They passed, loud as firecrackers. "Ready..." He uncoiled slowly, feeling Roantree rising silently beside him, and watched Pennington go to the car, glance again at the Library-- but not once behind her. She took out the communicator, changed the setting, raised it to her lips, and softly said the word "now" into it. Kirk heard that mutiny signal very clearly, and saw her close the communicator with a smug little smile.

"Now," he echoed, into the whole listening network.

Roantree took quick aim, squeezed the trigger, and blew out the car's left rear tire.

The blast roared like thunder in the canyon of the street, and splashed Pennington's legs with rubber shrapnel. Pennington screamed, spun around, and dropped the communicator.

"Now! Now! howled two-score angry voices. Roantree automatically chambered another round, jumped over the concrete wall with Kirk barely a step behind, ran a short way forward and skidded to a halt on the black street, with her shotgun aimed directly at Pennington's solar plexus. "Don't move!" she bellowed."

Anarchists came boiling out of their hiding places to encircle the car: out of store-fronts, over walls, up from hooded stairwells with Sparks in the lead. Unnoticed cries of alarm rattled inside the Library doors. Pennington, mouth agape, saw no one but Kirk and Roantree.

"The game's up, little Luddite!" Roantree snapped. "Hand over the phaser diagram!"

Shocked silly, oblivious to the footsteps behind her or the distant noise at the Library door, Pennington committed the fatal error of panic. She grabbed her phaser.

"Look out!" Kirk yelled, whipping up his shotgun.

Roantree fired an instant before he did.

The first blast lifted Pennington up off her feet. The second knocked Kirk flat from the unexpected recoil, caught Pennington full in the face and threw her onto the hood of the car. A dozen more shotguns opened up on her, from as many directions, and at almost the same time. In the eye of the lead-hail storm, Pennington was thrown from blast to blast, unable to fall. Her body jerked and flailed in a wild, grotesque dance, flying apart in pieces from the waist up, surrounded by a halo of red fragments. The last pair of shots disintegrated her head.



The firing stopped as abruptly as it had begun. What remained of Pennington collapsed wetly on the hood of the car, spilling fresh streams on the splattered asphalt. She resembled nothing Kirk could think of except a torn sponge saturated with red paint. The air stank of blood and cordite.

The Anarchists stared for a long moment, then heaved a collective sigh like the sound of distant waves, and sagged with relief.

"...over," Kirk gasped, pulling himself upright. "It's over."

"Oh, my God.." groaned a voice from the Library corner.

"Not done yet!" snapped Sparks, running forward, probably the only member of the team capable of fast motion just then. "Get the diagram off her! We need it to show 'em." His kepi fell off his head as he jumped onto the car. He fumbled at Pennington's shot-chewed belt, looking for a pouch that could hold the precious phaser diagram.

A bolt of blue light caught him, held him frozen and haloed. The halo expanded, filled with light, then just as

suddenly disappeared. 41 stunned Anarchists gaped at the empty spot in the air where Sparks had been.

"Interrex!" Quanna gasped, her face white as it could go. "He chose--"

"No! Not Sparks!" Kirk screamed, turning toward the only place the beam could have come from.

The other Kirk was half-crouched at the curb, Spock and McCoy right behind him, staring at his drawn phaser. "...tried to set it on heavy stun..." he muttered. "I-- I must have turned it too far. I didn't mean to..."

You murdering fool! Kirk lunged away from Roantree's hands, dashed across the remaining space of street and rammed his fist straight into that other Captain's jaw. The impact rocked him on his heels, but it knocked his other self down. He stood panting for a few seconds, shaking in the wind that lifted his silver-blanket cape, ignoring the footsteps pattering up behind him, glaring down at that innocent fool's stupid amazed face and bitterly hating his stupid, fatuous, innocent guts.

"You idiot!" he snarled, his voice cracking off the stones. "These people come all this way, through all these hellish months and halfway across a Romulan galaxy, just to save you! You, and your friends, and your ship, and your universe, and everything else you've got! And you-- you stupid, arrogant hothead-- you gave them this!"

"But-- but he--" The other Kirk flinched away from him, utterly bewildered, not trying to get up. "They murdered that woman! One of my crew--"

"--And the biggest traitor you ever met! She would have destroyed your whole universe-- and not by accident. What do you think she was doing with that car? Why do you think she was running away?"

The other Kirk gulped, thinking that over. Behind him, Spock and McCoy exchanged looks.

"She and those other replacements you just added to your crew," Kirk plowed on. "They're from a group called People for Temporal Control. Ever hear of it? They wanted to go back in time and change history, change it so that the Federation never happened, and you-- you damned fool-- you gave them their chance! They would have done it this time, except for us."

"This time?" Spock gave him a thoughtful look.

The other Captain gave him only a sidelong stare full of doubt.

"Don't you understand?" Kirk raged at him. "She stole the universe-- and we've just given it back!"

"How do you come to be in possession of these facts?" asked Spock, moving forward to get a better look at him.

"And who the hell are you?" The other Captain managed to find his voice.

"You... Don't you know?" Kirk took a step backward, chilled, as understanding came. "Spock," he turned to the Vulcan. "Don't you recognize me?"

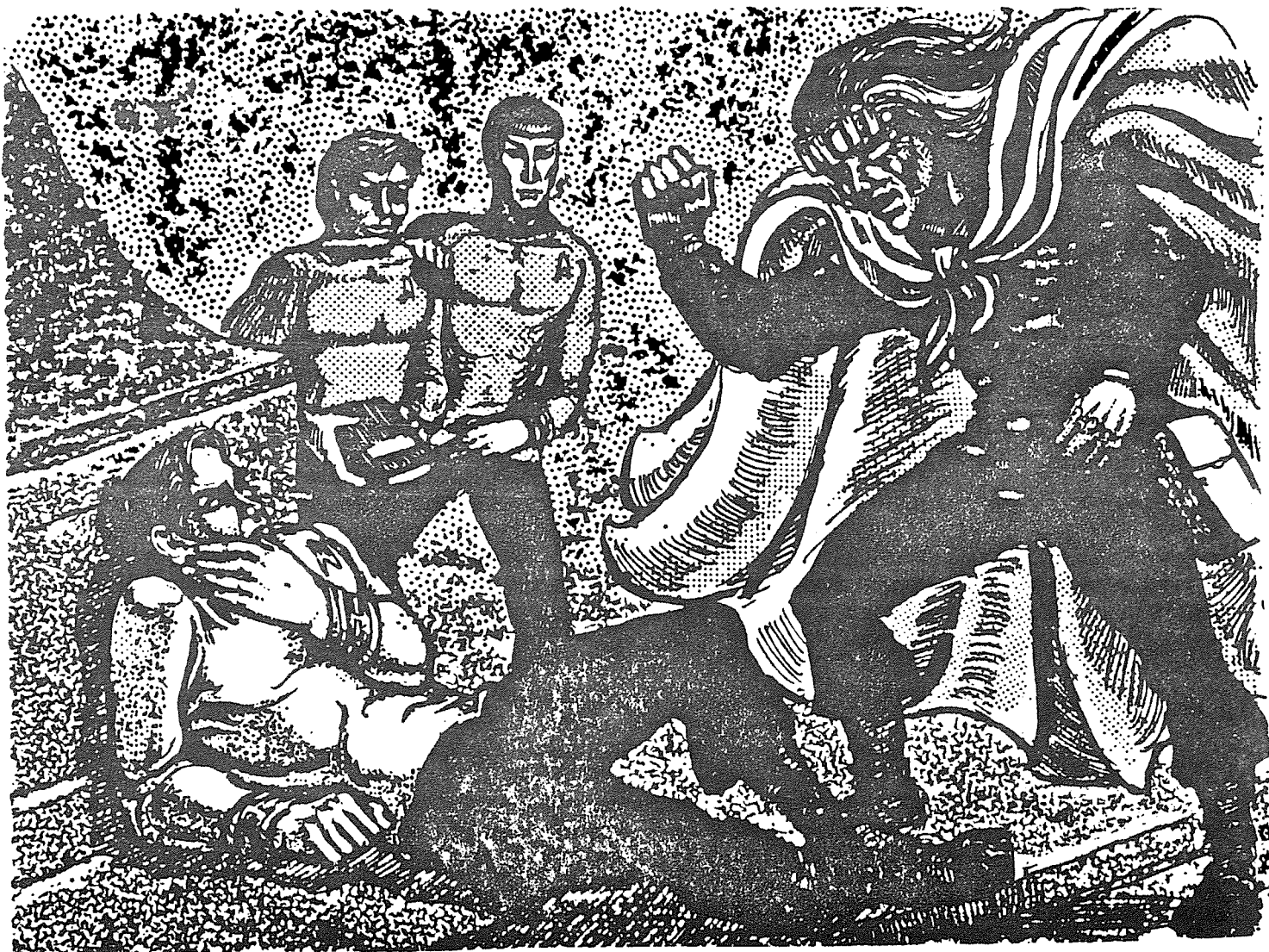
Spock stared back, eyebrows knitting in more confusion than a proper Vulcan should have revealed.

"Bones, not even you?"

McCoy looked at him, looked at his tricorder, and sat down right where he was, very fast. "Oh my Lord..." he whispered.

"Bones?" gulped the other Kirk, daring to pull himself to a sitting position. "What-- why is he talking to me like this?"

"Dammit!" Kirk almost cried, "I'll talk to me any way I like!"



Spock gave a very un-Vulcan gasp.

The Captain whipped around to look at him, tense with frustration and growing fright. "Spock, what does he mean? Bones? What's wrong with you two?"

"They've guessed," Kirk sighed. "I'm you, you fool; you, nine months from now. I'm you as you would have been, if Pennington had gotten away."

"No... Oh, no." The other Captain scrambled to his feet, eyes wide. Kirk could feel the wave of horror pouring off him, hear the thoughts screaming. No! No! That can't be-- Not that... that tattered walking corpse... It was so very familiar, the way he tried to mask the terror with fury. "Why should I believe you?" he shouted, a little too loud to be convincing. "All I see is that you've attacked us, killed one of my people, and given me a crazy story. Let's see some proof, you-- you-- whoever you are!"

"Jim," McCoy groaned, "my tricorder readings--"

Kirk laughed humorously and pulled the tape-carrier off his shoulder. "Here!" He tossed it to the Captain. "Those are standard ship's tapes. Read 'em and weep. The whole story's there."

"Here, too." Guannechota stepped forward, holding out a folded piece of computer-readout paper with flecks of blood on it. "I just took this from Pennington's body, as Sparks was attempting to do when you killed him. For verification of this, analyze the material-- also the blood on it."

Spock too the paper, opened it and raised both eyebrows.

"Who are you?" the Captain gasped, glaring at Quanna.

"I am yor wife that will be."

"Wife..."

"Uh, Jim," McCoy muttered over his tricorder, "an awful lot seems to have happened to you..."

"Dammit, no! Not me!" the Captain insisted.

Kirk couldn't help laughing.

"Captain," Spock almost whispered, staring at the paper. "This is a diagram of a primitive but effective phaser, easily made out of crude native materials."

"That's what Pennington was going to give to the crude, material natives," said Roantree, coming up beside Kirk. "She meant them to have phasers, so they could defeat the Moon People when they came back to Earth."

"And who are you?" the Captain asked, rubbing a distracted hand across his forehead.

"Me?" Roantree gave him a wintry smile. "I'm your sister."

"I don't have a sister!"

"Well, you've got one now." Roantree shrugged. "Or maybe I'm you, too. It all depends on how you look at it."

The Captain groaned.

"More proof," Kirk added. "Call Scotty. Ask him to check on what's happening in the transporter room. That's where Pennington's friends are holding their little mutiny right now-- unless he has them under control already."

The other Kirk nodded, somewhat glassy-eyed, pulled out his communicator and called the ship. The Anarchists waited silently while he questioned, and was answered. When he closed the communicator and looked up, his face had taken on a gray tinge. "All right, you've made your point," he said, looking fixedly at Kirk. "Just what do you want me to do?"

"Get out of here. Take your friends and beam back up." Kirk pointed skyward for emphasis, his jacket-sleeve flopping down his thinned arm. "And do it fast, because a flash-flood is coming within the hour to sweep this city away." He felt a cough coming, and clutched his chest.

"If that is how the city was destroyed," Spock put in, "then our mission is accomplished and there is no further reason to remain here." He looked Kirk up and down. "But tell me, Sir, has not your action, in warning your earlier self, created a time-paradox? How shall you warn yourself of an action which will not occur? What will become of you if the present Kirk does not... endure what you have endured?" His gaze flicked briefly over Kirk's scars.

"The Guardian..." Kirk shook his head vaguely. "The Guardian said it would all be straightened out. Go to the Guardian of Forever and ask it to explain." He could feel the medicine wearing off, the first tendrils of weakness and pain creeping

into him. There wasn't much time left.

The other Captain nodded silently, still staring. Kirk realized that the stare was directed at his arm. He looked, and saw that his jacket-sleeve had slipped back to reveal the worn cuff marks of his command-gold shirt, and the two-and-a-half rounds of tarnished braid with toothmarks in them. He considered how he must look, he and his shaggy horde, to the man he'd once been. "You have your information," he urged wearily. "Take it and go."

"But you," McCoy insisted, "what about you? We can't just leave you here..."

"The Guardian will take me back. Thanks anyway, Bones."

McCoy looked as if he were going to cry.

The other Kirk raised his communicator and called the ship. His hands were shaking. "Scotty," he said quickly, "three to beam up, these coordinates. Right now."

Scott must have been expecting that, for the communicator hum and sparkle began before the Captain finished closing his communicator. The three men in Starfleet uniforms glittered, glowed, faded-- and to the last they kept their eyes on Kirk.

The wind blew bits of leaves through the air where the three had stood, and the Anarchists blinked and stirred as if coming out of a waking dream. "Now it's over," Kirk told them. "Now it's done."

As if the words were a spell of release, his strength ran out of him like water, and a monumental weariness clubbed him down. He managed to stagger as far as the Library steps and to lie down without falling. The Anarchists halted below the stairs, only Guannechota and Roantree dared to follow.

"How do we proceed?" Guanna asked. "How do we return to the Guardian's world, and our own time?"

"Just call..." Kirk panted. "Call the Guardian. It'll answer... few minutes... not long..."

The Anarchists obligingly shouted, "Guardian! Guardian!" to the four winds. "Guardian, take us back! Bring us home! Guardian!" until the streets echoed. Kirk watched dispassionately, not really able to care. He was too tired to feel any sense of triumph or even accomplishment-- only relief. The long, terrible mission was over, and he could lie easy, and that was all that mattered.

Roantree seemed to share his mood. She stood a few steps from him, unmoving, holding something in her hands and staring at nothing in particular. She must have felt his attention, though, for she glanced up at him, her expression unreadable.

??? he asked silently.

"...all for the sake of a phaser-gun," she said, her voice bitter. "They don't leave much, do they?"

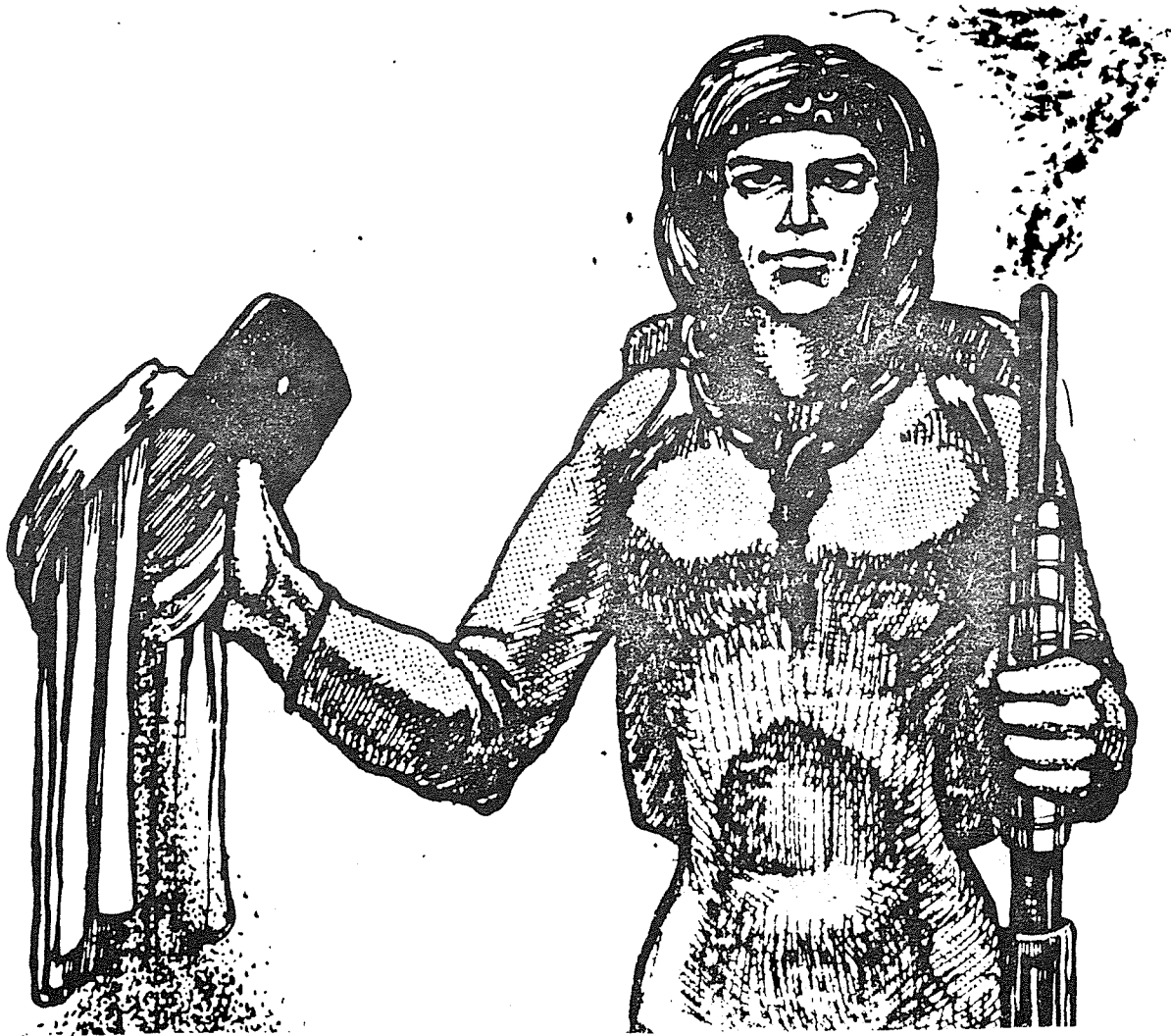
She opened her hands to show what she was holding. It was Sparks' old kepi, with a few pinches of dust in it. A ray of sunlight shone through the ancient bullet-hole in the visor, throwing a gold coin of light at Kirk's feet.

"Clean, quiet, almost pretty way of killing," she went on. "No loud noise, no recoil kicking your shoulder, no blood, no smell, no messy corpse lying around... Nothing to show that you've killed at all. You can walk away and forget." She glanced at the sun overhead. "I think I prefer the shotgun. It's honest."

"...Eminiar and Vendikar..." Kirk whispered. "Oh Jen, I'm sorry!" He was, too. At the end, feeling comes back... "I never expected... not Sparks..."

"Interrex," murmured Guanna, unheard.

"So that was the earlier you," Roantree set the kepi firmly on her head, its veil and visor shadowing her face. "Were you usually like that, before all this?"



"God, I hope not!" Kirk struggled up on his elbows. "It's hard to... see myself as him... almost a stranger. I've changed so much... don't think I could ever... be that again..." Will I think that when I've gone back? What will I be then? Guardian... 'converged to its match'... and mine? What? He took a long look at Jenneth Roantree.

"Voici!" Jean Battre-le-Diable's voice screeched across their thoughts. "The mist! The time-mist! The Guardian!"

Heads turned. Necks craned. Other shouts added to Jean's. Fingers pointed to where a thick white mist was forming, gathering in the middle of the street. As they watched, it began to move toward the group huddled at the foot of the Library stairs.

"Join hands!" Roantree shouted, lunging toward Quannechota and seizing her wrist. "Hold tight! Don't want to leave anyone behind!"

In a wild scramble of motion the Anarchists grabbed at each other, forming a tangled line of linked arms. Quanna

reached down and caught Bailey's hand just as the mist swept over Hot-Trot Paula. Jean, next in line, faded into the fog with a little squeak of dismay. Like an incoming tide the time-mist swept up the line, pulling the Anarchists into itself with growing speed and strength. The remaining travelers leaned and slipped and stumbled forward as the vortex approached.



"Jim!" Roantree shouted, stretching for him. "Can't reach you! Get up, quick!"

"No," said Kirk, thinking as fast as he ever had in his life. "Go without me."

"What?"

The mist swept over Quannechota, but stopped at the wrist that Roantree was holding as if it didn't want to take her along.

"Oh no," snarled Roantree, grabbing Quanna's outstretched fingers with her other hand. "No, we all go together!"

The time-mist roiled a moment, almost seemed to shrug, and obligingly climbed over Roantree, too.

"Jim!" she screamed, freeing one hand to make a last grab for him. "Jim!"
"Goodbye, Jenneth."

The mist swallowed her up. It pulsed and boiled a moment longer, then thinned and faded. Again, the street was empty. The whole city was empty now, save for the thin weeds and the countless skeletons, the ceaseless winds, and Kirk.

"Nothing now but to wait," he said to nothing in particular, stretching out his silver thermal blanket-cape to catch more of the sunlight. The air was warm and the sun was bright, gleaming like silver fire off his spread cape and Crown-of-Mirrors, and he paused to notice how lovely the sunlight was. It had been a long time since he felt this relaxed and peaceful. ...I've always been something of a gambler, he thought, settling his hands behind his head. 50-50 odds aren't bad... He smiled up at the perfect blue of the sky, knowing very well that he had less than an hour before the flood came. If Time had any further plans for him, it would have to spring them soon. ...either the Guardian pulls some stunt, or the water comes and covers me up... but I don't go back with Jenneth, not to her universe, or that life... This is for me alone.

He closed his eye, enjoying the warm sunlight and the sound of wind and distant waves, and the long moment's peace. I've done my job all the way to the end, he considered. Nobody can ask more of me. No more decisions, no more plotting and scheming, no more running or fighting, no more goddam duty worth more than my life... For once I'm doing something just for myself. Gamble. Made my move... now lean back and rest. Time, the next move's yours.

A shadow fell over his face.

He opened his eye just in time to see the Guardian's mists close around him. What are you going to do? He drew his breath to shout, but the world fell out from under him. The implacable time-vortex pulled him in.

Because Something Is Happening Here And You Don't Know What It Is, Do You, Mr. Spock?

Personal Log, Stardate 5897.6, McCoy recording:

JIM -- THE CAPTAIN -- JUST WENT THROUGH THE GUARDIAN. NOT EVEN SPOCK KNOWS HOW LONG WE'LL HAVE TO WAIT HERE FOR HIM TO COME BACK. USUALLY IT TAKES ONLY A FEW MINUTES, OBJECTIVE TIME, BUT IN THIS CASE ALL BETS ARE OFF.

IN FACT, EVERYTHING'S BEEN OFF SINCE WE CAME BACK FROM 1990. WHAT WE SAW AND HEARD DOWN THERE WAS BAD ENOUGH -- ESPECIALLY FOR JIM -- AND THOSE TAPES WERE WORSE. THE FIVE WEEKS SINCE, ALL THROUGH THE EMERGENCY CONFERENCE WITH STARFLEET COMMAND AND THE TRIP OUT HERE HAVE BEEN ONE LONG WORSENING NIGHTMARE. NIGHTMARES... WE'VE ALL BEEN HAVING 'EM: SHARP, CLEAR, CONTINUOUS, FEARFULLY REAL, AND... CONSISTENT.

THAT'S THE WORST, I THINK. THE DREAMS MATCH, EVERYBODY'S DREAMS INTERLOCK, WITH NO POSSIBLE COLLUSION. THEY COVER MUCH MORE TIME, SUBJECTIVELY SPEAKING, THAN OUR WAKING HOURS -- AND THE EVENTS IN THEM ARE SO MUCH MORE VIVID THAN OUR DAILY ROUTINE, THESE PAST FEW WEEKS, THAT IT'S GETTING HARD TO TELL WHICH REALITY WE'RE ACTUALLY LIVING IN. SPOCK THEORIZES THAT THESE DREAMS ARE ACTUALLY PSYCHIC TRANSMISSIONS FROM OUR OTHER SELVES, OUR OTHER LIVES, IN THAT OTHER TIMELINE -- AND THEY GET STRONGER AS WE APPROACH THE GUARDIAN BECAUSE THE LINES ARE ACTUALLY CONVERGING. NICE THOUGHT, THAT!

WELL, I'M A DOCTOR, NOT A TEMPORAL PHYSICIST. I JUST KNOW THAT THIS BUSINESS HAS WORN EVERYONE'S NERVES DOWN TO THREADS. GOOD OL' JIM SMILED BRAVELY AS HE WENT UP TO THE GUARDIAN AND STEPPED THROUGH, BUT HIS FACE WAS WHITE AS PAPER. EVEN SPOCK'S SHIVERING A LITTLE. ME? I'M PRACTICALLY WANDERING AROUND IN A DAZE. JUST TRYING TO KEEP UP WITH EVERYONE ELSE HAS RUN ME PLUMB NEAR EXHAUSTED, WAY TOO BUSY TO THINK. MAYBE THAT'S JUST AS WELL; MY OTHER-TIME DREAMS STOPPED TWO DAYS AGO, AND I'D RATHER NOT DEAL RIGHT NOW WITH WHAT THAT MEANS.

"Doctor, must you make your professional notes sound so theatrical?"

"I don't have much choice, Spock. Just you try crowding all the important events of the last month into a minute's worth of tape, and see if it doesn't come out sounding like an old fashioned horror story."

"I see no necessity for summarizing the events of the last month at this time."

"No reason? Hah! How's this for a reason? We really don't know what we're dealing with, what's going to happen, or what the Guardian plans to do. We hope that Jim's just going to hop back to 1990 and warn his earlier self, finish the time-loop, and come back safe and sound, and all this will be over. But we don't know that it's going to happen that way. For all we know, our whole history could change! The Enterprise and all aboard her could disappear, wiped out like they'd never existed, and we'll be left alone down here with nothing but the knowledge we've got between us."

"You are composing a message to 'put in a bottle', so to speak."

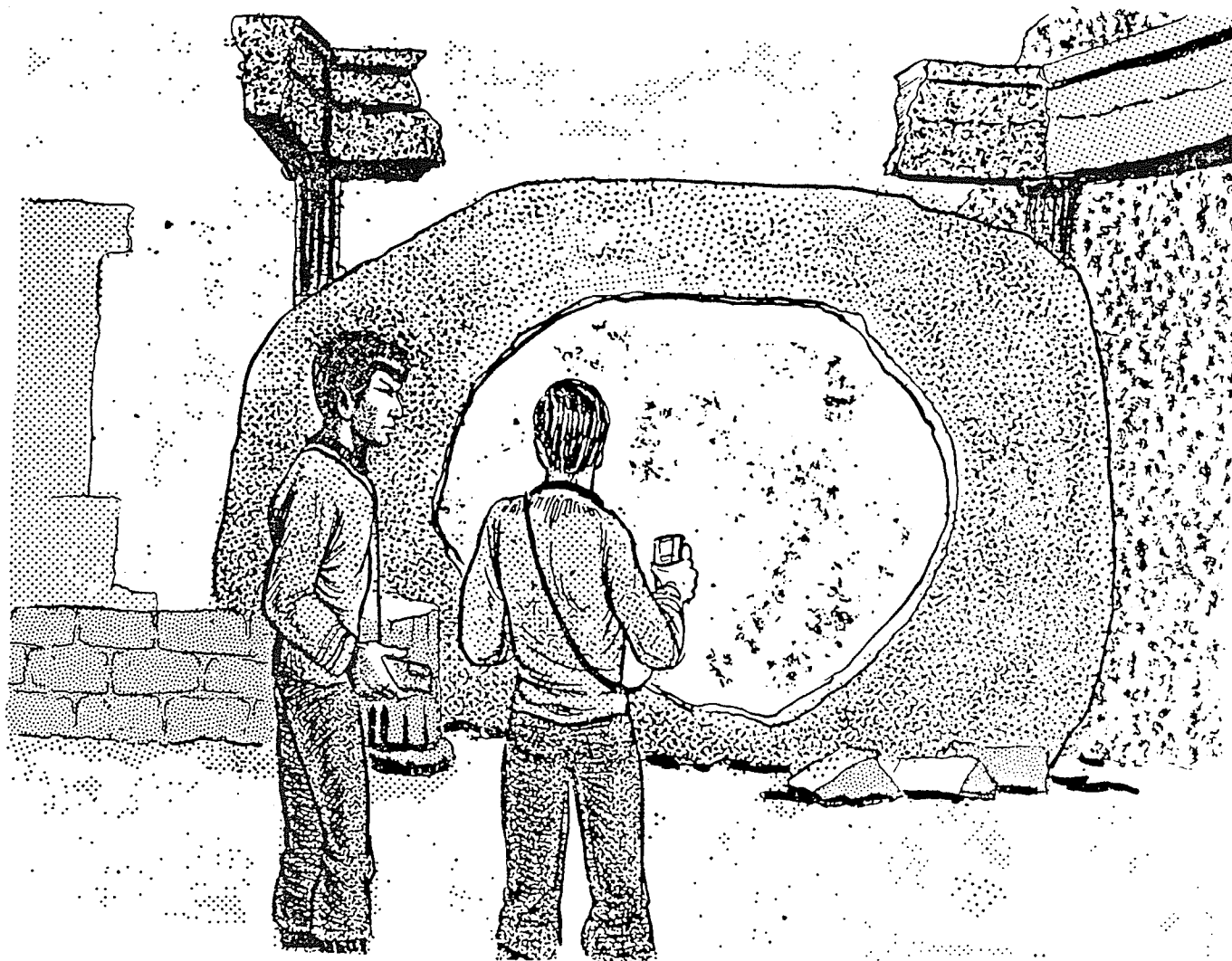
"Something like that."

"Illogical."

"'Bout as logical as what you're doing -- poking that tricorder at bits of rock and ruin, pretending you care about the results, keeping busy so you won't have to think about the results, keeping busy so you won't have to think about what'll happen to Jim -- not to mention the rest of the universe."

"These ruins have never been thoroughly studied. Any data I can gather from them while waiting for the Captain shall be of some scientific value."

"Sure. I make last messages, you make last-minute notes. We each have our ways of passing time while we wait for the universe to end."



"That is a typical exaggeration. I assure you, the universe will not end."

"Then just what is goin' to happen? You don't know either."

"There are too many unknowns for any sure conclusion, but there is a high probability that one of two phenomena will occur: either the Captain's warning will complete the time-loop and our time-line will continue separately, or... the timelines will converge in some fashion unknown to us."

"And Jim? How's he gonna come back? Strong and well and just a few minutes older than when he left us here? Or a scarred-up one-eyed scarecrow who lived through nine months of hell? Which one, Spock?"

"I do not know. Insufficient data."

"And it's possible that he might not come back at all!"

"That... is unlikely."

"But you don't know, do you? We don't know anything about what's going to happen. Why Jim should have gone into that

alone--"

"Doctor, we do know one fact: if the Captain had not gone through the Guardian to warn his earlier self, that would have created an impossible time-paradox because he had already been so warned. It was necessary to proceed at once to the Guardian and follow its instructions, in order to provide that paradox."

"That's just what I was sayin'. We really don't know what we're doing here. It's all up to the Guardian."

"That is essentially correct."

"And the Guardian has a bizarre sense of humor -- Spock, look."

"The mists! Jim -- The Captain is returning."

"That's not Jim!!!"

Out of the boiling time-mist in the Guardian's arch leapt a shaggy figure, the another, and another, and more. Spock and McCoy hastily stepped back. The crowd grew -- dozens of people, pouring through the archway hand in hand, slipping and stumbling in the grey dust. There were about 40 of them by the time the last one of them cleared the arch and the mists faded. They looked around, saw the two Starfleet officers, stared and murmured among themselves. For a long moment the two parties did nothing but look at each other: recognizing, calculating, wondering. The Anarchists stared at Spock and McCoy in their bright blue and black uniforms, then glanced at themselves in their worn homespun and buckskins, and surreptitiously rubbed some of the dust off their boots.

"Make no sudden moves, Doctor," Spock whispered a warning. "They seem upset by our presence."

"They're upset...?" McCoy gulped.

The crowd parted a little as one of the Anarchists stepped forward. McCoy couldn't help shivering as he recognized her; shadowed under that peculiar visored hat, her face was so much like Kirk's that it was frightening. Oh Lord, thought McCoy, sweating in the cold, is this all of Jim that we're going to get? Roantree returned his stare with a thoughtful look, and then moved toward Spock.

"Hello again," she said, looking Spock up and down. "Ah, is it all right for me to touch you?"

"If it is necessary," Spock allowed, standing perfectly still.

"It is," said Roantree. "We have to be sure..." She took one of his hands as carefully as if it were a rare bird's egg, and studied its features warily. "Green," she murmured. "The nails are green. Green blood, it must be..." She let his hands go and reached slowly toward his face. "Hush, easy," she said, as if soothing a nervous horse. "I won't hurt you." Spock raised an indigent eye-brow. She caught it gently under her index finger, tracing the hair-pattern, making certain it was real. Spock found it surprisingly difficult not to shiver at the strange familiarity of the touch. Her hand slipped across his cheek, closed lightly on the point of his ear and tugged gently -- just enough to be sure that it wouldn't readily come off. "For real," she announced, turning to the other Anarchists. "He's a real alien. He's that alien, the one we saw on the tapes and in Chicago, and he's alive now. It's all real! We've crossed over to the other line! Now we can go home!"

At the word, a great shout went up from the other 40. They whooped and cheered, they cried and hugged each other, they pounded each other's backs and fired their shotguns into the air, and a few of them joined hands and started a wild impromptu circle-dance. Some of them clutched at Roantree and urged her to sing for them; she obligingly rubbed her eyes dry and unpacked her 12-string. Spock took several steps backward, flinching at the noisy display.

"Excitable, aren't they?" grinned McCoy. "Hmm, but where's Jim?"

"Where indeed?" Spock echoed, studying the crowd. Kirk was definitely not among them -- not the Kirk they knew, and

not the one-eyed Silver King. Spock stepped forward and caught Roantree's arm just as she was strumming the first chord. "Coordinator Roantree, why is our Captain not with you?"

"He isn't..." Roantree looked around her. "No, he didn't come with us. He wouldn't take hold of my hand, wouldn't jump into the mist with me. The last I saw of him, he was still on the Library steps. I don't know where he is now, or what's become of Jim."

"I see." Spock looked at her, looked at the empty and silent Guardian, did some fast calculations and actually shivered. "Coordinator Roantree," he said, voice oddly reluctant, "I must inform you that your... social standing in this universe presents something of a complicated problem."

"How so? Don't you know who I am?"

"That is exactly the problem. In one sense, you are James T. Kirk. For all that we know at this point, you may be the only James T. Kirk remaining alive in this universe. In fact..." Unlikely, but possible. My duty to warn her. "If our Captain does not return, then you may very well be the rightful Captain of the Enterprise."

"Spock, you can't mean that!" squawked McCoy.

"Doctor, I was referring to the legitimate problem of identity--"

"Me?" Roantree breathed, looking skyward. "We, have that ship?"

"No! That's impossible!" McCoy insisted, horrified by the deeply hungry look he recognized on her face. "Spock, you've got to explain it -- no, wait. Cap-- uh, Coordinator, look; you must understand, you can't just beam onto Jim's ship and take over... I mean, we saw in the tapes how well you managed before, but -- but that was a special situation, an emergency, and -- and -- well, damn it, there's just so much that you don't know..."

"True," Roantree agreed, dragging her eyes away from that tall daydream. "This is a whole new ball-game. There's so much I've got to learn about this place; its people, history, science, where our places are in it... Besides, let's not write off Jim as if he were dead." Under the kepi's shadow, her expression grew distinct and strange. "It doesn't... feel like he's dead. There's something... He feels alive -- I just can't tell where."

"The mind-link!" McCoy recognized it. "Spock, maybe she can--"

"Coordinator, please attempt to reach him," Spock urged, moving closer. Psychic talent among Humans was tricky and unpredictable, he knew, and it required careful monitoring. "Try to describe his surroundings."

Roantree obligingly closed her eyes and concentrated. "Mist," she said. "That's all I can see. He's alive... and he's in the time-mist." Unconsciously, her hands moved on the 12-string.

...mist... time fog... endless gray smoke... how long?

There was no up or down, but no sense of dizziness. The time-mist curled featurelessly gray on gray, without light or shadow. There was no feeling of motion, but somehow Kirk was certain that he was not standing still. He could vaguely feel the time passing, but he couldn't tell how slowly or how fast. He was long past being afraid, but he couldn't help feeling impatient.

How long? he wondered. How long? ...can't mean to leave me here forever... like poor Lazarus, sealed forever in the misty corridor between universes... No! Not that! A clean death or my old life again... or even Jenneth's universe... Jenneth... mist... echoes...

'In the mist and smoke
By the twisted oak
I'll listen to the branches whisper.'

...What? What does that mean? ...one of Jenneth's songs... Jenneth! Contact -- a lifeline, if I can follow it, jenneth! Can you hear me? Sing on, Jenneth! Louder! He leaned toward the echoing words of the unknown song, trying to tune in a stronger image of Jenneth's voice, the sight of her face, the feel of her mind. The signal obligingly strengthened, as if she were reaching too.

Barn-dancers reel.
The furrowed field
Must yield and quickly turn,
Harvest gone.
The hoot-owl's song
Is one we now must learn.'

There was a definite sense of motion now, of fierce wind and gathering speed. Through the seething mist ahead another figure appeared.

That's not Jenneth!

* * *

Around and around in the ancient dust, 40 Anarchists danced in a ragged double ring. The steps were simple, the rhythm fast, and their eyes were wide open and dreaming. Caught up in the power of the old ritual song, they leaped and circled and stamped with the precision of a machine, a grinding-mill, a measuring-wheel as old as Stonehenge, during the magic round of the year.

Outside the ring crouched Spock and McCoy, silent and staring, not even noticing that they were clutching each other.

Inside the ring stood Jenneth Roantree, eyes shut, fingers moving blur-fast on the 12-string, oblivious to everything around her, singing into the arch of the Guardian.

'Who, who, who are you?
And if it's you, who said so?
Who can it be?
It's only me--
Dancing in the meadow...'

* * *

...Oh no... not you again...

But it was; it was his other self, that 9-months-younger innocent fool that he'd knocked to the sidewalk in long-drowned Chicago not half an hour ago, that slightly-chubby unscared Captain who'd never lost a battle.

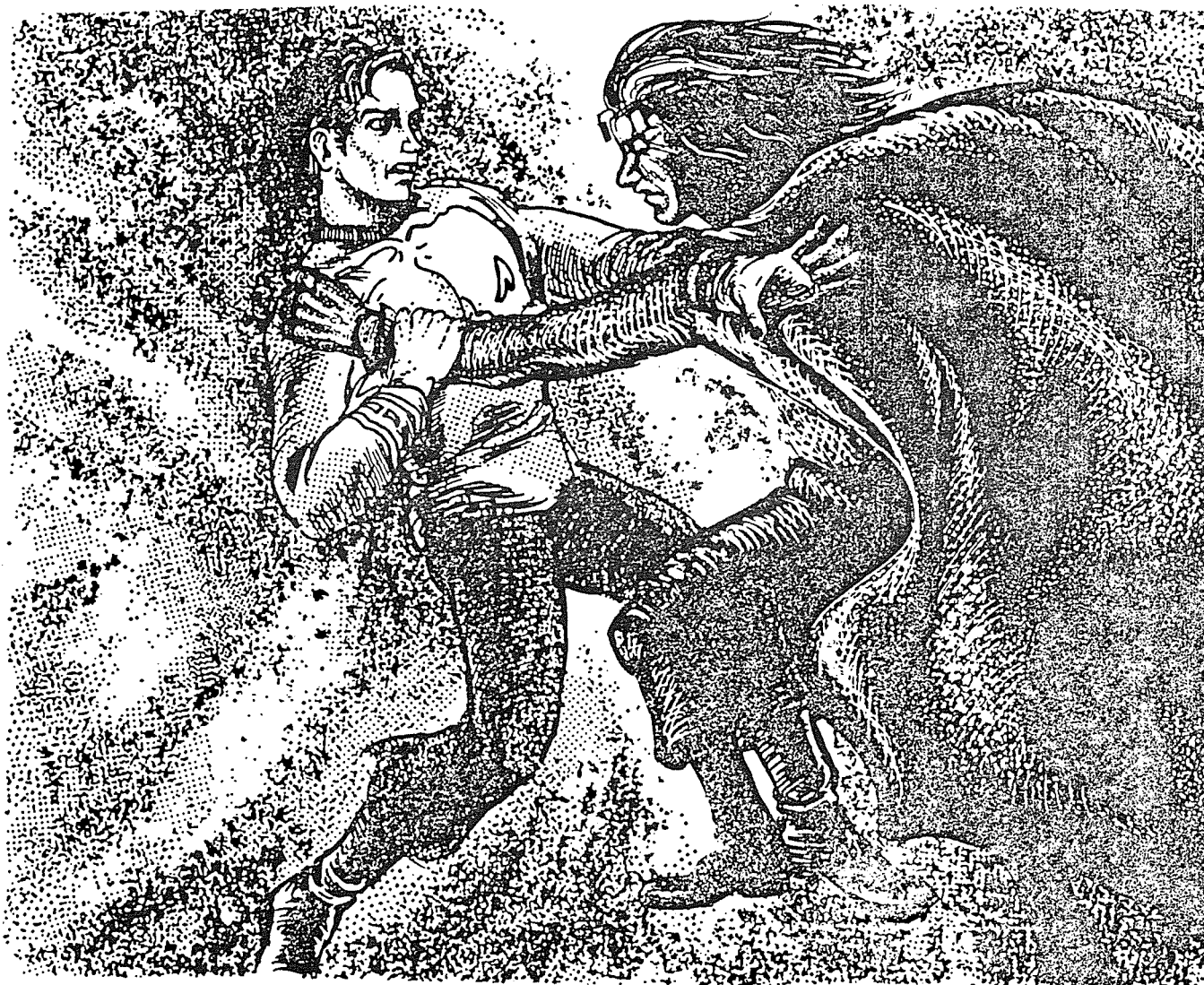
...Laughing as a young man laughs who never lost a fight! ...But you're not laughing now. You're terrified. I can feel it.

NO! the other Captain insisted; but his face was white and drawn, his eyes enormous, fierce unwillingness obvious in every move as he floated and slipped and staggered closer through the boiling mist. The winds of time pushed and cuffed and drove him forward, without pause or mercy. With every step and slide, with every degree of distance less. His thoughts/feelings grew louder and clearer. Kirk chuckled cruelly as he read them.

It's no use, he thought back, stretching out his hands in ironic welcome. It doesn't matter what you feel, what you

want, what you can or can't stand. That's irrelevant. All that matters is getting the job done. Come here now. Come here, and let the Guardian finish its sport with us...

The Captain raised one visibly-shaking hand to ward him off. A surge of time-wind shoved him forward, and Kirk grabbed his wrist. The other's thoughts burst in on him like a sudden dawn.



COLD! COLD! YOUR HAND LIKE SNOW -- Sharp impression of the last time he'd felt that hand, clenched impacting solidly against his jaw, catching him off-balance and by surprise. ...MOVED SO FAST... WASN'T EXPECTING...

You thought we'd all panic and run away. Kirk understood; he saw it all, the whole bizarre scene unrolling like a tape-strip, details sharp and bright and clear as if the memory was his own. Is that what you thought of us, you arrogant bastard?

--RAGGED, MURDERING DEGENERATE SAVAGES--

The Captain had been in the periodicals room, studying ancient newspapers when the first shot came. The shock of the

noise -- and its implications -- practically knocked him out of his chair. Spock and McCoy sprang to their feet, and needed no time-wasting words to bring them running down the corridors after him. The scramble through the halls and down the stairs seemed to take forever. Through passing shattered windows they heard fragments of the noise outside; growing shouts and rattling footsteps echoing fearfully loud in the empty streets. WHAT'S HAPPENING OUT THERE? WHO? WHERE DID THEY COME FROM? WHY? HURRY! The unmistake-able rage and menace in the voices turned him cold, and he drew his phaser as he ran.

"Captain, be careful," Spock warned, running beside him. "We must not--"

The thunder of massed shotgun fire erupted just as they cleared the doors. The firing ended by the time the Captain reached the street-corner, and the long seconds in between were etched in his mind in a red vision of pure horror. -- PRETTY GIRL ONE OF MINE TORN APART IN LITTLE PIECES SLOWLY DISINTEGRATING WILD DANCE OF DEATH SPRAYING RED RAIN BRIGHT IN THE SUNLIGHT -- He'd been in Starfleet a long time, and he'd seen much dying, but damn little of it had been as grotesque and ugly as that. He was shocked thoughtless.

Jenneth said it! Kirk realized. You're too used to phasers -- 'clean, quiet, almost pretty wall of killing.' Not like that...

The firing stopped, letting Pennington collapse in a wet red heap, like a pile of soaked rags, she who had been so pretty a minute before. "Oh, by God..." HIDEOUS WAY TO DIE! The ring of killers sighed and relaxed, as if pleased with themselves. PLEASED! WITH THAT! VICIOUS MURDERING MONSTROUS INHUMAN -- DESERVE TO BE WIPED OFF THE FACE OF THE EARTH! He blindly clutched that phaser's setting-dial and clicked it hard over.

"--ot dun yet!" bellowed one of the savages, lunging forward. He was huge, nearly half-again Kirk's size, shaggy and bearded and looking more like a bear than a man. MUST BE THEIR LEADER. "Gett'a die grim offer," he seemed to be saying. The Captain could make no sense out of it. "Wi'nee ditta sho'em..." Something white, maybe a headcloth, fell off of him as he scrambled onto the car and began pawing at the mauled corpse.

OMIGOD, WHAT'S HE DOING TO THE BODY? NO! STOP -- The Captain whipped up his phaser and fired.

Blue light, blue halo, disintegration. The others stared.

"Captain," Spock's voice crackled. "Why did you kill that man?"

"I..." Horrified, he looked at his phaser. Sure enough, the setting-dial was turned all the way up. "...tried to set it on heavy stun..." WHAT HAVE I DONE? "I must have turned it too far." LAME EXCUSE! "I didn't mean to..." He looked up at Spock, and saw the flat disbelief subtly printed on his face.

Liar!

WAS IT A LIE? DIDN'T I WANT TO...? WHAT HAVE I DONE?!

He was still staring at Spock when he heard the pounding feet racing near. He turned just in time to see the other one -- the tall, scarred, silver scarecrow -- running toward him, mad-eyed and empty-handed. He started to rise, felt his arm automatically lift the phaser. NO! DON'T SHOOT! ENOUGH HARM ALREADY -- He stopped right there, off-balance, pulled two ways. The scarred, silver-crowned man cleared the curb, moving amazingly fast, and slugged him.

You murdering fool! The impact of the alien thought was far heavier than the physical blow.

MY LORD, HE'S A TELEPATH! WHAT -- NO, DON'T THINK! DON'T MOVE. WAIT... He stayed right where he was, not daring to get up, trying unsuccessfully not to react while the other's rage poured down on him like an avalanche, and the explanation with it. BUT WHAT -- WHO IS HE?

I'm you!

NO!

'When the seasons pass
And the hour-glass
Has all too quickly shattered,
You'll lay me low
Beneath the snow
And wonder if I mattered...'

Shock of double-vision, two self-images superimposed, and the time-winds roared. For an instant the mists parted, showing countless slightly-altered selves like an infinity of mirrors, all circling around one point: Kirk's grip on the other Captain's arm. They looked together and saw the fingers closing, sinking right through the braid-striped sleeve and into the arm beneath, like ink into water.

Convergence! Kirk reached for the Captain's shoulder and watched his hand sink into that, too. We're supposed to --
The universes are converging, through us! Right through us!

The Captain screamed. NO! NOT LIKE THIS! His battered resolve gave way, and he tried to throw himself backward. NOT THIS AGAIN! ANYTHING ELSE BUT THIS -- His mind filled and radiated with the ice-sharp image of himself doubled, divided, split by the transporter into two sides of his nature, Wolf and Lamb, Id and Ego, freed from nature's unity and going their separate ways, fearing and despising each other, each wishing to all the gods of the universe that the other one were dead.

-- and this time I'm the Wolf, Kirk thought bitterly, looping his arms around the struggling Captain and dragging him close. Now, as then... we need each other, can't live without each other, have to be joined, much as we may hate it. There's no other way out of this. Stop fighting me, damn it! Let's get it over with!

-- NO NO NOT LIKE THIS YOU DON'T UNDERSTAND -- The Captain arched backward, thrashing helplessly against the pressure of the time-wind and the grip of alien/familiar arms. -- THE TRANSPORTER -- ONLY AN INSTANT, AND WE WERE SEPARATED ONLY A FEW HOURS... THIS IS FIVE WEEKS, NINE MONTHS, 200 YEARS! IT'LL TAKE -- IT'S TAKING TOO LONG! CAN'T -- And then clear thoughts dissolved into a featureless howl of horror and pain as their bodies began to melt into each other, atom by atom, across the half-twist in time.

Kirk felt it happening, understood perfectly, and he screamed too. Convergence by transporter had taken only an instant, and the transporter's stasis had kept him mercifully unaware of the blending until it was over. This time both of them were fully awake, aware of every instant of the convergence, the realigning of mismatched weeks and months, under the pressure of 200 time-split years. There was no way to measure the time that passed as the streams joined through them. seconds or centuries flowed into that blending, carrying with them all the weight of sundered histories, forcing separate minds and memories and wills and awareness into a single too-tight channel of identity. Too much! Too different! Too long -- There was no merciful lapse of consciousness, but even so, Kirk never knew the instant when the endless screams stopped being double and became only one.

* * *

'If you get brave
Run to my grave
And holler: "Are you dead?" No!
No tombstone
Can cover my bones
I'm dancing in the meadow.

Roantree's eyes opened, glassy and unfocused. Her hands automatically played for a few bars more, then fell numbly off the strings. The dancers shuffled to a stop, panting and blinking and a little confused. Roantree didn't notice them. Her hands climbed to her head and clutched hard, as if trying to hold herself together. "...Converging, Converging!" she gasped, swaying. Spock stepped forward to catch her, but the other -- the tall Indian woman -- was there first.

"Jenneth, what did you do that for?" Bailey complained, clutching her arching knees. "We just wanted a song to celebrate with -- not the Year-Wheel. Oh Mother, my poor joints!"

"I... sang it out loud?" Roantree panted. "...sorry. Didn't mean..."

"What happened?" McCoy insisted. "What happened to Jim?"

"Done," Roantree whispered, leaning heavily against Quannechota. "He... just one, now... I think... coming soon..." Her eyes rolled aimlessly for a moment, and she clutched Quannechota's arm. "Oh... Quanna, if I hadn't held on... if he hadn't refused... if we'd gone through the Guardian together, he might have blended like that with me! With me!"

"Blended?" snapped Spock. "Explain."

Roantree only shook her head and pointed toward the Guardian. The others turned to look. Sure enough, mist was forming within the arch. Spock started forward, McCoy barely a step behind him, pushing the Anarchists out of the way. Before he could reach the Guardian, a section of the mist darkened. A figure formed in the mist, stumbled through the arch and staggered to a halt on the gray-dusted ground. Spock and McCoy stopped where they were, staring, unsure.

The man at the archway was wearing a Starfleet uniform, a command gold-shirt with two-and-a-half rings of tarnished braid on the loose sleeves, but no silver cape, no Crown-of-Mirrors, no brace glittering over the top of his boot. He was very thin, and his hair was long, and his hands were pressed tight over his face. He was still screaming.

Spock strode forward and took him by the wrists. "Captain?" he asked, almost hesitantly. "...Jim?"

The last scream dropped to a long, sobbing moan. Kirk pulled his hands away from his face and stared, wide-eyed, toward that well-remembered voice. There were no scars on his face. He had two eyes. "Spock?" he whispered, scarcely daring to believe. He saw double -- every sight, sound and thought was impossibly repeated -- but he recognized that face, and he knew what its presence meant. "Spock! Real, solid... Yes! Oh, I'm home! It's all over, and I'm home!"

He clutched the Vulcan's blue-clad shoulders, and quietly collapsed in his arms.

Captain's Log. Stardate 5897.7. Spock recording:

THE LANDING PARTY HAS RETURNED TO THE SHIP WITH 41 UNEXPECTED GUESTS IN VARIOUS STATES OF EXHAUSTION AND THE CAPTAIN IN A COMATOSE STATE. ALL HAVE BEEN TAKEN TO SICKBAY FOR QUARRANTINE, EXAMINATION AND TREATMENT. IT IS PERHAPS BEST THAT OUR GUESTS REMAIN THERE UNTIL SOME DECISION CAN BE MADE CONCERNING THEIR FUTURE. THEY WISH TO RETURN TO EARTH IMMEDIATELY TO SEE WHAT CHANGES HAVE TAKEN PLACE THERE IN THE ALTERATION OF TIMELINES: CLEARLY, THEY HAVE NO CONCEPTION OF THE ACTUAL SITUATION OR THE NATURE OF EARTH SOCIETY. WE ARE CURRENTLY ON COURSE FOR STARBASE 12, AT WARP FACTOR 5, TRAVELING UNDER QUARRANTINED STATUS UNTIL WE HAVE DETERMINED THE EXTENT OF POSSIBLE TEMPORAL CHANGE.

Nurse Chapel led Roantree and Quannechota into the last isolation room, apologizing for the cramped conditions, the necessity of staying in Sickbay, and anything else she could think of. She wasn't sure why she felt obligated to apologize. As the door shoosed shut behind Christine, Roantree dropped to the couch and turned her eyes up to the ceiling. "No joy in this," she murmured, voice rough with fatigue. "No sense of victory, no eagerness for the prize, no excitement... I'm just damned tired. Hell of a way to walk into Paradise."

"Perhaps it's too big to be felt all at once," said Quannechota, sitting down beside her and tugging off one of her boots. "Like a stab-wound: at first there's only the impact and the shock. The pain doesn't come until later. Perhaps when we waken, the feeling will be there." ...Also, there is a loss we have not yet mourned...

"...waken? How long? I'm too tired to sleep. Stunned, I guess."

Quannechota gave her a long look, then sat down beside the pack and rummaged through it until she came up with the player-pack of tapes. Roantree frowned vaguely, as if she meant to ask what she meant to do with that, Quannechota hunted around the room until she found the communications console, then set the tapes into the player slot and depressed the switch. Abruptly, the sounds of ancient music played out of the speaker: bold, bright, hopeful string-chords with just the faintest trace of sorrow underneath, a full chorus of them before the words began.

'In the year of '39, assembled here the Volunteers,
In the days when lands were few.
Here the ship sailed out into the blue and sunny morn,
Sweetest sight ever seen.'

That's the 'Launching Fragment'!" Roantree gasped, sitting up. "We sang it on the Sunfire -- Sparks didn't tell me he'd found the whole thing. He..." She stopped right there, memories connecting, and reached up one hand, very carefully, to take off the forgotten kepi. She pulled it off slowly, staring at the ancient bullet-hole in the duty visor.

'Don't you hear my call, though you're many years away?
Don't you hear me calling you?
Write your letters in the sand for the day I take your hand
In the land that our grandchildren knew.'

"...Sparks..." she whispered, feeling the tears burn and run. "Why him, Quanna? Of all of us... Time's blameless man. Why him?"

"Interrex." Quannechota sat down beside her. "He took the bolt meant for Jim -- or you."

'In the year of '39 came a ship in from the blue.
The Volunteers came home that day,
And they bring good news of a world so newly born
Through their hearts so heavily weighed.'

"Dead on the doorsteps to Paradise!" Roantree cried, pressing her arm against her eyes.



'For the Earth is old and gray. To a new home we'll away.
But my love, this cannot be--
For so many years have passed, though I'm older but a year.
Your mother's eyes from your eyes cry to me.'

"Didn't we make enough... blood-sacrifices on the moon? What bloodthirsty gods... demanded one more? Sparks..." Bitter sobs fragmented her voice. Quannechota reached for her. They wrapped themselves in each other's arms and dropped onto the couch, faces buried against each other's shoulders.

'Don't you hear my call, though you're many years away?
Don't you hear me calling you?
All your letters in the sand cannot heal me like you hand.
For my life still ahead, pity me.'

Roantree was crying to fiercely to notice the warning in the words, but Quannechota caught it. "Avert the omen!" she whispered, sinking into the raging storm of grief. The emotional whirlpool closed over her head, and she followed Roantree down the long swirling tunnel of release, exhaustion and sleep -- down the Inworld journey they'd shared so many a time before, and always emerged renewed. This time too... she hoped, with her last conscious thought. ... 'Gone -- gone to rise again'...

Medical Log, Stardate 5897.7, Dr. McCoy recording:

MY GOD, WHAT A MESS! JIM'S COME BACK, BUT IN WHAT SHAPE? HE'S SICK AS A DOG: INCREDIBLY THIN, EXHAUSTED TO COLLAPSE, AND INFECTED WITH SOME RAVENING PLAGUE THAT'S EATEN HOLES IN HIS LUNGS, WEAK SPOTS IN HIS GUTS, AND NOW IT'S STARTED ON HIS BONES. I CAN'T BEGIN TO IDENTIFY THE DAMNED THING, EXCEPT THAT IT'S THE SAME PLAGUE HIS... OTHER SELF HAD WHEN I SAW HIM IN OLD CHICAGO. NURSE CHAPEL AND THE ANARCHIST DOCTOR SEEM TO HAVE SOME INFORMATION ON IT, AND I'VE GOT TO GO CONSULT WITH THEM IN A FEW MINUTES. BUT HOW DID HE GET IT? AND WHAT HAPPENED TO HIM? FROM HIS GENERAL CONDITION AND THE LENGTH OF HIS HAIR, HE MUST HAVE BEEN GONE FOR AT LEAST FOUR MONTHS. WHERE WAS HE, AND WHAT WAS HE DOING? I CAN'T BEGIN TO FIGURE IT OUT. I CAN'T GET A DECENT PSYCHOTRICORDER READING: HE'S UNCONSCIOUS FOR NO REASON, AND THE FEW READINGS I CAN GET ARE CHAOTIC AND CONTRADICTORY. I WON'T TRY TO WAKEN HIM UNTIL WE GET THE PHYSICAL PROBLEMS STRAIGHTENED OUT, AND THAT'LL BE HARD ENOUGH.

AND THEN THERE ARE THE ANARCHISTS. ALL 41 OF THEM. JUDGING FROM THE FEW CROSS-TIME TAPES OF M'BENGA'S BRIEF EXAMINATIONS, THESE SHAGGY SPACE BARBARIANS ARE WALKING PLAGUE-CARRIERS. THEY'RE THE DESCENDANTS OF SURVIVORS OF THE EUGENICS WARS -- AND SOME OF ITS NASTIER BACTERIOLOGICAL WEAPONS -- WITHOUT BENEFIT OF MODERN MEDICINE. I'VE PACKED THEM ALL INTO SICKBAY, ALONG WITH EVERYONE WHO'S COME IN CONTACT WITH THEM -- INCLUDING SPOCK, CHRISTINE AND ME. JIM'S THE MAIN PROBLEM, BUT AFTER THAT I'M GOING TO HAVE TO DEAL WITH ALL THESE INCREDIBLE PEOPLE, AND THAT'S A JOB FOR A WHOLE TEAM OF DOCTORS. AND NEVER MIND THE WAY THE HISTORY AND SOCIOLOGY AND ANTHROPOLOGY TEAMS ARE RUNNING AROUND MY SICKBAY GABBING WITH THE PATIENTS AND GETTING IN THE WAY. OH, THE ANARCHISTS ARE TAKING IT VERY WELL: THEY SPEND THEIR TIME EATING, SLEEPING, DRINKING, PLAYING WITH THE SYNTHESIZERS AND THE LIBRARY COMPUTER, ASKING QUESTIONS, GABBING TO THE SCIENTISTS... THEY WANT TO GO BACK TO EARTH AND STEP INTO LIVES THAT THEY THINK ARE WAITING FOR THEM. WHAT CAN I TELL THEM? WHAT CAN ANYONE TELL THEM? THEY'RE ENJOYING THEMSELVES NOW, BASKING IN THE ATTENTION OF THE SCIENCE TEAMS, BUT SOONER OR LATER, THEY'RE GOING TO GET IMPATIENT WITH BEING PUT OFF. WHAT ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH THEM? I JUST DON'T KNOW... I DON'T THINK ANYONE KNOWS.

"Next!"

"C'est moi!" Jean Batre-le-Diable trotted in and hopped enthusiastically onto the examination table. "I'm next. What is all this equipment? These indicators I know, but what are those things, and those? That other doctor never did explain them to me, and this is the first time I've ever seen them used."

"The first time?" McCoy frowned in annoyance as he set the scanners. "Then M'Benga never got around to giving you a complete physical?" I'll bet it never occurred to him. Over specialized turkey... "Lie still."

"Most probably he did not have the opportunity," Spock suggested.

"Ah!" Battre-le-Diable turned wide, eager eyes on the Vulcan. Meeting the legendary Dr. McCoy was wonderful enough, but the idea of conversing with his first real live alien -- and another living legend at that -- left him practically gibbering with excitement. "Eh, Citoyen, je suis enchanté a faire votre connaissance! I can't tell you how honored I am finally to meet such a famous Scientist as yourself -- famous to us, I mean... uh, though certainly you must also be famous here, to judge from what we saw of the ship's records. I've read so many of your tapes -- er, both of you, Citizen McCoy... Doctor. So much I wish to understand of your records, Citizen... Spock? Do you have another name?"

"You could not pronounce it."

"Oh, try me! I am also Chief Linguist of our crew -- it's my hobby -- and I've never met a language I couldn't pronounce. Did you know I learned Basque as an adult? And in only three years? According to legend, the Devil himself couldn't learn Basque, and he studied seven years. That's how I earned my name; I beat the Devil -- Battre-le-Diable."

McCoy grinned pointedly at Spock's ears. Spock sighed and dutifully recited his full Vulcan name. It was a surprisingly long collection of clicks, buzzes, clanks, rattles and hoots. McCoy raised an eyebrow.

"Hmmm ...yes. I am most pleased to meet you, Citizen Spock --" Jean Battre-le-Diable repeated the Vulcan name perfectly, with every click, buzz, clank, rattle and hoot in place. Spock raised both eyebrows.

"...some incredible anomalies in these readings," McCoy hinted.

"Remarkable," Spock admitted. "I did not think a Human tongue was capable of shaping some of those syllables."

"Uh, Spock, he doesn't exactly have a Human tongue," said McCoy. "Please stick it out, Jean."

Battre-le-Diable stuck out his tongue. It was forked.

"Now turn it over," said McCoy.

Battre-le-Diable did so, clockwise, and wiggled the fork ends in opposite directions.

"Did I really see that?" Spock forgot himself.

"You sure did. Put it back, Jean. It's not the result of an injury; he was born that way."

"Mais oui." Battre-le-Diable basked in the attention. "When I was examined at birth -- as we all are -- it was judged to be a viable mutation, even a valuable one. Just so: I can pronounce any language, imitate animal cries and bird-calls, do sound-effects--"

"He's a mutant, Spock. In some way or another, they all are. I don't believe some of the things I've come across, examining them. The Eugenics Wars had some wildly unexpected results on these people. If you'll recall some of the oddities the scientists found when they came back from the Moon, and that after less than 20 years--"

"I have studied the subject. As I recall, a world-wide public health program was required to handle the problem. Its success was the major argument which reconciled a population of --" Spock halted right there, remembering.

"Made people cease to be Luddites?" Battre-le-Diable thought he understood. "Out, that would fit; an excellent argument in favor of Science. It was much different with us..." He sighed.

"I would be interested in learning," Spock ventured, "how your people survived for 200 years without the aid of modern medicine."

"Those who were wise adopted a sensible breeding program. Those who didn't, died out. What we do... er, did, was to adapt the custom of widespread breeding and careful inspections of newborns."

"Inspection?" McCoy couldn't help asking. "What happens if the newborn babies don't meet your health standards?"

"Then they are killed."

McCoy turned away quickly to hide his reactions. Spock flinched, then rearranged his face to its most expressionless setting.

"The bodies are usually buried in orchards, to feed the trees..." Jean noticed that something wasn't quite right with the other two. "Er, of course, if the mother wishes to keep her child anyway, she must leave the community. Very few women do so... Look, Citizens, it may seem cruel to you, you with your advanced Science that has no trouble with such things, but we have no choice. You wouldn't believe some of the monsters that still show up, in so many births. What are we to do with such poor wretches? How should we keep them alive? How should we feed them, when we can barely feed ourselves? How should we care for them, when every hand is needed for survival? We think it better to kill them painlessly than to let them starve slowly. What else would you have us do?"

There was no answer. Spock and McCoy shared a grim look of understanding: That attitude would be most unpopular on Earth. Earth culture practically worships children, preserves life at almost any cost... Your deadly practicality would horrify all. They tacitly agreed to change the subject. "What precisely do you mean by 'wide-spread breeding'?" Spock asked politely.

"Ah, that. A much pleasanter topic, yes... Healthy adults are encouraged to breed with as many other healthy adults as possible, so as to keep the gene-pool moving. There are the Solstice orgies, for example, and the temples of initiation--"

"The what? Please explain the term."

"Initiation? Simple. After adolescents pass their adulthood tests and reach breeding capability, they are required to go to the House of the Wolf, if male, or the House of the Lady, if female, and there give up their virginity with adults who have proven good breeders. If a healthy child results, the individual is rated a good breeder and encouraged to breed more. If the child is wrong, or if there is no child, the individual tries again. After three failures the individual is marked a Drone."

"I see." McCoy rubbed his forehead and silently swore at himself for being so squeamish. "And Drones aren't allowed to breed?"

"Allowed?" Battre-le-Diable looked offended. "What do you mean, 'allowed'? Everything is 'allowed'! ...Eh, perhaps it doesn't mean the same thing in your language... Tolerance! Well, Drones may keep trying, if they wish. Indeed a few drones manage to breed successfully after many attempts -- but there is the mark, of course, so they cannot conceal their problems even if they wished to. Many of them simply choose to be sterilized."

"A logical procedure," Spock admitted, though his face was still rigid. "But if promiscuity is encouraged among 'good breeders', what is the purpose of your triple marriages?"

"To provide homes and family for the children, of course." Jean gave him an odd look. "In your world -- I mean, here, do the women usually raise children all alone? Do the men just wander from woman to woman to woman? Don't people like to live together that much?"

"Of course people live together!" McCoy cut in. "Our folks get married, stay together, raise kids, just like yours. Except we usually do it in pairs..." They'll have trouble with that, too... "Well, that's enough. Get off the table and come into my office." You too, Spock. And you, Nurse. I want to ask about these Wheezes that Jim's got. Tell us all about it; think hard, leave nothing out. Jim's life depends on it."

"He's no better, then?" Jean frowned, taking a chair. "Did the Guardian do nothing to help him?"

"Him? Ah..." You're certain that he's your Jim Kirk? "Well, it didn't do enough." McCoy picked up two medical tapes and poked them into the viewer. "He... got back his eye, lost his scars, and the brain-damage isn't there. He's stronger

than -- than he was, but the disease is just as advanced. The only reason he isn't dead is that there's more of him for the damned thing to chew on. So what is it?"

"It... is definitely bacterial. We usually get it as children. Fever and coughing, sometimes a rash, a week, maybe ten days: we get over it. With adults the fever's higher, the coughing's worse and it lasts longer -- sometimes a month. It can kill, but that's rare. As near as our records show, the Wheezes have been known since the... what you call the Eugenics Wars. Perhaps it was a mutated form of an older disease, possibly used as a germ-warfare weapon, but so many records were lost that we have no idea what it originally was. We can identify it under a microscope: it is rod-shaped, encapsulated -- but we can't relate it to anything else we know. The histories say that it was just after the Collapse there were many deaths from diseases with similar symptoms, but after the first ten years the death toll went way down. Either people developed immunities, or the disease mutated to a harmless form... relatively harmless anyway. We just don't know.

"Definitely bacterial... That's something anyway. Nurse Chapel, you said something about having a warning from -- from your other self, some sort of lead about the nature of the bug. What was it?"

"Rather strange, Doctor." Christine fidgetted for a moment, caught herself at it, and stopped. "I saw myself looking at the display image of the bacterium, concentrating very hard; repeating over and over again: 'I've seen it before, long ago, possibly in school in one of my history courses.' That's all, but the impression was very strong. The same message was repeated on the tape that I... sent myself. I'd strongly suggest looking for identification of the microbe in the ancient history section of the medical library."

"Spock, you can help with that. Now Jean, what sort of treatment did your people use for this?"

"We had so little that would work on the Wheezes... All I could give Big Jim was the cough-syrup, heat, dry air, ultra-violet radiation. I'm sorry." He looked down at his big-knuckled hands, studying their scars and callouses and irregular nails. "We gave him this thing, and we have no cure for it. I'm so sorry... We may have killed him, and I can do nothing to prevent it! This -- Biology, Medicine -- it's my trade, and it's just... not... good enough."

"Aw, hell, you got this far, didn't you?" McCoy reached across the table to pat Battre-le-Diable's shoulder. "Quirt apologizing for what you didn't do: nobody could have asked it of you. In any case, you can help Nurse Chapel take care of Jim. He's going to need constant nursing, you know."

"You want me to--? Oh yes, yes! Certainly! Just tell me what's needed!"

"Hmm. Well, there are other problems besides the Wheezes. We're not sure what the Guardian did to Jim, how long he was gone or what happened to him, so I want you to watch him and see if you can figure out why he's in that coma. Also, you can help monitor the effectiveness of the treatments. Nurse Chapel, start the Captain on a full course of IBD. It ought to give the bug something to chew on until we can find a specific."

"'IBD'?" Jean puzzled. "What's that?"

"'Intraspecific Broad-Spectrum Decacyline', sometimes named 'Instant Bug Death'. It's good for all simple bacterial infections and it ought to work on this thing, hold it at bay, anyway. Go get busy with it."

"Incredible!" enthused the little Biologist, following Christine out the door. "All we had was penicillin, streptomycin and a couple of topical sulfas. Tetracycline was no more than a legend--" The doors whooshed shut on him.

Spock turned an unfathomable look on McCoy. "You must realize," he commented, "What an excellent argument his behavior is for the existence of the Non-Interference Directive."

"No, I don't realize. What's the Prime Directive got to do with this? It doesn't apply across universes, far as I know."

"Doctor, it should be obvious from Citizen Diable's behavior that our guests are suffering from culture-shock, mani-

fested as a sense of inferiority, and this is a direct result of heavy contact with our civilization."

"No surprise: we're technologically 200 years ahead of them. Still, they're doing very well in that department. They haven't given in to despair or acted superstitiously toward us; on the contrary, their doing their damndest to study, learn, try to catch up."

"That, too, will create problems. Soon enough, either from our crewmen or contact with others, or at best when they reach Earth, these people will discover that the cultural differences between themselves and us include much more than marital and child-bearing customs. I have put certain blocks on the computer, but this is only a stop-gap measure. Eventually our guests must discover that this universe is not as Anarchistic as they hope and believe. Earth possesses governments, Doctor, governments which regulate, protect and support people; our guests do not believe in such regulation, nor would they appreciate such protection or even support. Earth also possesses a culture whose basic premises are in many ways alien to theirs. The simplistic ethics, the scarcity-economics, the peculiar religious attitudes and casual acceptance of violence which these people display would be ill-accepted. The collision is inevitable; they want to go home, and do not yet realize that they have no home in our universe."

"Dammit, it's a big galaxy!" McCoy snapped, louder than expected. He'd been worrying about that too. "There are plenty of worlds besides Earth where they could settle... once they get over the initial shock. Hell, they could do it; they're Science-worshippers, adventurers, curious by nature and eager to see all the wonders of the galaxy. I'm sure the Federation could find a place for them... uh..."

"The Federation, doctor? The Federation is a government; it has laws and military institutions. This ship is a military vessel, little though our guests realize it. They may not take kindly to being given a territory by the grace of a government. Even if they would gracefully accept another planet to settle upon, where they could structure their society as they like, I doubt if they would appreciate the knowledge that open space -- all of their sky -- is under some government's control."

"Well, what do you expect me to do about it? I'm a Doctor, not a Sociologist."

"You are also a qualified psychologist. I suspect that you have, in fact, been engaging in a program of social acclimation in hopes of reconciling the Anarchists to their less-than-perfect Paradise."

"What do you mean? I haven't done anything."

"Yes, you have -- just now. Was it necessary to send Citizen Diable to help nurse the Captain, when his medical knowledge is hopelessly inferior to that of the lowest-ranking duty nurse? I submit, Doctor, that you did so only to soothe Citizen Diable's sense of inferiority by giving him a useful-seeming task."

"More than that. dammit!" McCoy tried to stare down the Vulcan, and lost. "All right, that's part of it... Hell, you don't realize that there isn't much worse for a Human than to feel useless? But beyond that... Look, I've read the tapes and now I've met the man, and I tell you, that shaggy little backwoodsman is a born doctor, or I've never seen one. No, don't give me any cold Vulcan stares; I know my trade, and I can spot someone who's got the talent for it. Sure, he's used to dealing with tools and techniques more than 200 years out of date, but the hardware is only half of what it takes, and he's got the other half."

"'Medical intuition', Doctor?"

"Goddamn right! *sigh* Look, he's got a doctor's -- or any good scientist's -- knack for observation. The other reason I sent him along with Nurse Chapel is that he really might notice something that the rest of us would miss. He really could help. Understand?"

A little truth strengthens the excuse, Spock thought. "You are still evading the main point. I have observed your treatment of the Anarchists, and I have noted what subjects they tend to research on the computer -- and at your urging. I put it to you, Doctor, that you -- like several others who sent tapes across time, are hoping to dazzle the Anarchists with our technology. You hope that they will be sufficiently awed by our science to reconcile themselves to the existence of

formal governments, and to accept our culture with good grace. Have you considered what will happen if this hope proves false?"

McCoy fidgeted with the tapes and looked away. "No, I haven't. It's not my department, anyway. Besides, I don't think it will come to that. Now shall we get back to finishing off the physicals and trying to find a cure for Jim?" He turned and stamped out of the office.

Spock gave an almost-Human sigh, got up, and followed the doctor back to the examination room. He had never had much respect for the human tendency to ignore the unpleasant, and seeing it exercised under these conditions made him distinctly uneasy.

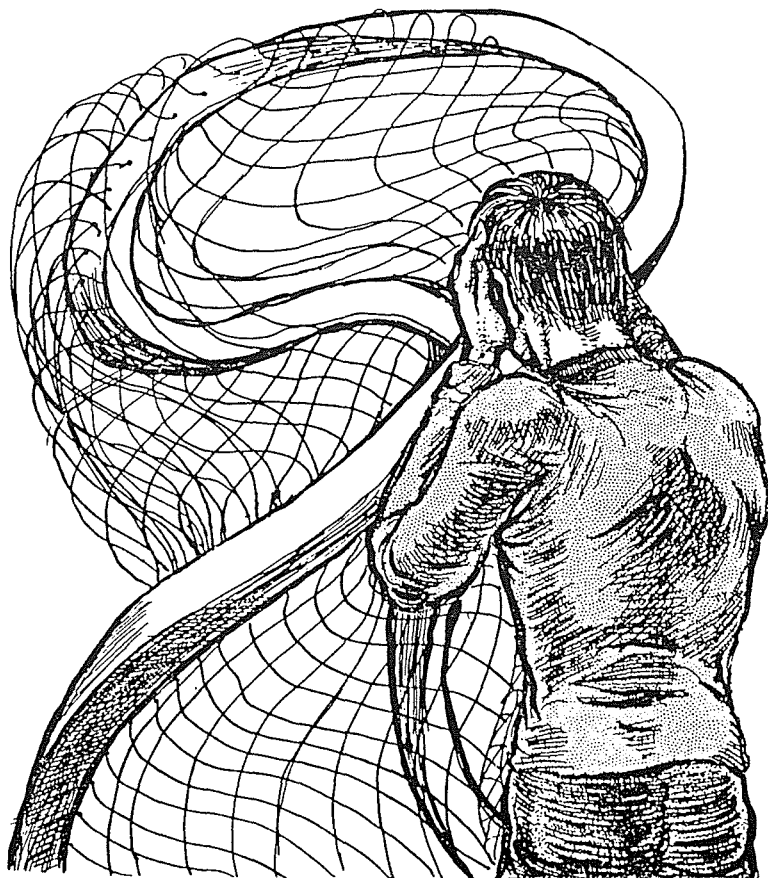
Personal Log, Stardate 5987.8, Scott recording:

I SUPPOSE I SHOULD BE GRATEFUL IT WAS DESALLE WHO FOUND IT. ANYONE ELSE MIGHT HA' GONE STREAKIN' OFF TA SPOCK FIRST, AN' I WOULDNA HAVE THIS CHANCE TA THINK THINGS OVER. I'LL HAFTA TELL HIM SOMETIME, BUT...

'TIS THE SUNFIRE'S JET GRILL. DESALLE DIDNA RECOGNIZE IT, AN' I DINNA BLAME HIM; 'TIS CHANGED, TWISTED INTA A STRANGE SHAPE LIKE A KLEIN BOTTLE OR AN INFINITY-SIGN... TWISTED BY GOD KNOWS WHAT... MAYBE THE GUARDIAN'S LITTLE JOKE. I WOULDNA RECOGNIZED IT MESELF BUT FOR THE PARTICULAR ROOM IT'S IN, AND REMEMBERIN' THAT FROM THE DREAMS...

--BUT THEY'RE NO' DREAMS! THEY'RE TRUE MEMORIES! 'TIS A' TRUE, AN' HERE STANDS THE PROOF OF IT! GOD KNOWS WHY... THE GUARDIAN TOOK JIM'S SCARS AN' LEG-BACK, HIS MANTLE AN' CROWN, BUT IT LEFT JENNETH'S JET-GRILL -- ONLY TWISTED IT. IT MUST MEAN SOMETHING, BUT I CANNA TELL WHAT. ALL I KNOW IS WHAT IT MEANS FOR ME...

THE TIMELINES DIDNA JUST CROSS; THEY CONVERGED. THE MEMORIES ARE TRUE. IT WASNA SOME OTHER MAN, SOME OTHER ME IN SOME OTHER PLACE, WHAT DID YON SHAMEFUL THING WI' ANNIE... I DID IT. 'TAS ME ALSO WHO TOOK COMMAND O' THE ENTERPRISE AN' FAILED SA MISERABLY AT IT. MY SIN AN' MY FAILURE. THESE THINGS MUST BE PAID FOR. I CANNA TELL HOW, NOT YET, BUT I'LL THINK ON IT 'TIL I FIND AN ANSWER...



Roantree stretched out on the diagnostic couch and flicked a brief glance at the indicators overhead. Somehow she couldn't take much interest in the proceedings, even this long after the end of the great quest, she still felt depressed and tired. It's Sparks... she thought. I'll hurt over that for a long time... She watched idly while McCoy stared at his instruments, did double-takes and double-checks, frowned and gaped and shook his head by turns.

"Ma'am-- er, Captain Roantree--"

"Coordinator." Why do they have so much trouble with simple job titles?

"Uh, Coordinator." Lord, how do I talk to this-- this space-going amazon? Especially knowing who she is... "Do you realize that you have severe scarring in the uterus which, uh, affects your fertility?"

"I know that. Even our primitive medicine could tell me that."

"I don't mean to--"

"No more children for me; I know it. No children, no husband, no ship, no city, no nothing."

"Coordinator, that is not strictly true," Spock cut in. Roantree turned to look at him. "You still have your crew, and of course yourself."

"Myself?"

"You retain your skills, which are not inconsiderable, and your health. Skilled ship's... coordinators are of value in this time and place, much more so than in yours. So are experienced space-ship crews, such as yours. You and your people would be welcome on many worlds, and in many space-lines." Spock deliberately ignored McCoy's open-mouthed stare. "I believe there is an Earth saying, to the effect that the end of one road is but the beginning of another. I see no logic in despairing over the past when the future is open to you."

Roantree thought that over, then gave Spock a faint smile. "Thanks for reminding me," she said. "But put all those other worlds on the shelf for a while. I just want to go home, see Earth again, see what High Harbor looks like now... and after that, get another ship."

"You desire a ship?"

"To replace the Sunfire, that I lost in getting your universe back. I hear that your Starfleet Co-op has lots of ships, big ones, designed for crews of hundreds, surely they can give us a small ship, one that a crew of 41 can handle. I don't think that's too big a reward to ask for saving your whole universe. Give us a ship to replace the Sunfire."

"Of course..." So above all else, she wants a ship. She is Captain Kirk indeed... that is the primary fact of her nature, even more than gender... With an odd sense of dislocation, Spock noticed how very much she resembled his Captain: same eyes, hair color, unconscious gestures, vocal pattern, alignment of bone and muscle. The last fact was especially disquieting; he was used to human females with softer, slighter, less athletic bodies. Jenneth Roantree looked like Jim Kirk with long hair and breasts. He wondered if the difference was due to the Anarchists' harsher home environment or their genetic oddities. ...Most likely the latter... he decided. "It is highly probable..."

"I should think so," Roantree agreed. "One ship -- a small one -- for a universe. That's a damn good trade."

Spock looked up and met McCoy's eyes. Damned good solution, he seemed to be saying.

Is it possible? Spock wondered. Would they be content with that? A ship is something they can understand. A galactic civilization may be a concept simply too big for them... A ship might be enough...

"Coordinator -- uh Citizen..." McCoy's southern gallantry battled with caution. "Hell, can I call you Jenneth? Fine. What I mean to say is, I can clear out that scar-tissue with no trouble. Just set aside an hour or so for surgery, and I'll

fix you up as good as new. You can be a mother again."

"What?!" Roantree snapped upright on the couch. "You can do that? You -- Tomorrow! This time tomorrow... if you won't be busy then."

"Well, not tomorrow, but in a couple of days." McCoy smiled. Yes, she does want children. She's a real woman after all, and not... "I'll make the arrangements. Now lie back down and let me finish examining you."

"...kids," murmured Roantree, obligingly lying back down. "I can have kids. There's still time. I'm not too old."

"No, not at all," McCoy agreed, studying the readouts. He felt fleetingly guilty, as if he'd considered bribing a Federation official. ...waving the benefits of our medicine under her nose... buying her off... "Like most of your people, you have remarkable cell-regeneration. In an easier environment than you're used to, one where you wouldn't be chewed up by injuries and deprivation and diseases, you could live to be over 100. You'll probably keep your fertility well into your 60's, barring accidents."

"Lord of Light!" Roantree gulped, thinking that over. "Then... you can do something for Quanna, and Bailey, and all the rest?"

"Sure. We'll start treatment as soon as the examinations are finished." He moved over to the service-table and picked up a hypo. "In fact, I'll give you this right now. Figured you'd need it; the rest of your crew showed positive, so I guessed that you would, too."

"Positive? What have I got?"

"Cancer," said McCoy, checking the dosage. "Result of being riddled with radiation in space. That ship of yours wasn't very well shielded, and neither were your space-suits."

"Where... is it?" Roantree asked, turning pale.

"Lymph gland in the armpit. Hmmm, this is a bit too much... bleed off some..."

"Hell of a way to find out," muttered Roantree, digging numb fingers into her shoulder. ...And you've got one hell of a bedside manner! Does it mean so damn little to you...? No, never mind him. Don't panic. Think. "I must have had it for months..."

"Three at least. You're lucky it's the slow variety." Why the hell wasn't it noticed before? They'd have been too busy, but... I'm going to have a long talk with M'Benga... "There. Just right."

"Then maybe it isn't too far advanced. Do you think you can get it all if you take off my arm?" What price paradise?

"What?! Take off your--" McCoy nearly dropped the hypo. "No! What kind of barbaric--"

"Then it's too late? I'm riddled with it? How long do I have?"

"All the rest of your life, woman! I've got the cure right here. Now hold still and let me shoot it into you." McCoy jabbed the hypo into her shoulder before she could move. "There, fixed. ...Ah, I take it your people didn't-- But even late-20th-century medicine could... You, ah, your people didn't have the cure?"

"Nothing but the knife. You mean your people have a one-shot cure for cancer? It's so common that you don't even think about it?"

"Actually, it takes two shots: one now, one next week. Another little... advantage of modern medicine. Now we do the neuroscanner..."

"Two shots... for cancer. Advantages of modern medicine. Uh-huh." Roantree tipped back her kepi, rubbed her shoulder and looked up at the ceiling. "I... think we're going to like it here." She shut her eyes and let the bottled-up terrors run out of her. She shivered.

"Sure, you'll like it." McCoy glanced at Spock, smiling broadly. Hear that, Spock? It's going to be all right! What's a little thing like politics, when you've got everything else? "It's good here. Oh, we haven't got immortality, but we've got about the best medical science in the galaxy. As for the other sciences, Spock can tell you better than I can. Main point is, Jenneth, there are hundreds -- thousands -- of wonderfully different worlds out there, and you can live to see all of them." Crazy readings... Damn, recalibrate to allow for the fillings in her teeth... Metal fillings! Dental caries! Barbarous...

"I can fill those teeth with natural enamel, if you like." Anomalous wave-form's still there. What...?

"No, they're all right. Did you hear something, just now?"

"Hear what?"

"Like... like somebody yelling in pain..." Roantree's face grew thoughtful, then grim and abstracted. "No, never mind. I know what it was."

"What are you talking about? Who-- What was it?" Crazy wave-form... telepathic surge! Where did that come from? She's not--

"It's Jim. He felt it, dimly, when I was upset just now..." For a moment she looked blank, then abruptly grimaced and shook her head. "All right, all right, I'm leaving."

"Jenneth, are you still in mental contact with the Captain? Don't leave him! Try to keep contact!"

"I can't!" Roantree snapped. "He doesn't want me in his head, howls when I get near him. It hurts... Oh, that must be another reason I've been feeling rotten: bleed-over from him!"

"Coordinator, did you receive any other impressions?" Spock leaned forward and urgently took her by the shoulder. "Could you get any information on his mental condition?"

"Hell, yes." She gave him a tense, shivery, deep-eyed look -- so terribly familiar that Spock automatically leaned toward her, ready with support if needed. "I saw... two. Two of him. The Guardian joined universes right through him, and with him. There are two of him fighting it out in his skull, and he's suffering from battle-fatigue. It hurts, Spock. It hurts like hell, and the last thing he needs is another version of himself coming in to add to the trouble." She squeezed her eyes shut and rubbed her forehead. "The best I can do... for both of us... is to keep away from him, mentally and physically. Contact only hurts us both. ...Oh, that medicine's making me dizzy. Are you finished with me? I'd like to go lie down."

"Uhm, yes. Send in the next patient. Nurse Chapel, help her back to her quarters, will you?"

"No, that's all right. Won't be necessary." Roantree got up, staggered a little, briefly accepted Spock's help and then gently stepped away from him. "Quannechota's next," she said. "Do what you can for her." She tossed McCoy a good imitation of a smile and walked slowly, carefully, out the door.

"Spock," McCoy turned to him, "Is it possible, what she said? Two of Jim?! What the hell did the Guardian do to him?!"

"Unknown." Spock looked distinctly perturbed. "I had assumed that the Captain merely crossed time-lines, encountered unknown difficulties, but succeeded in warning his earlier self so as to close the time-loop. It is possible that the... other contingency occurred. The time lines may have actually converged."

"Then -- then Jim, you, me, all of us -- we may all be... blends of ourselves and our... other selves. And those dreams -- Good God!" McCoy sat down fast in the nearest chair. "Maybe, somewhere I really died two days ago. Jesus!"

"At present this is only theoretical. We have only one piece of evidence, Jenneth Roantree's telepathic impression, which is subjective and unproven."

"I'm inclined to believe her."

"I note that you are inclined to believe all manner of information from attractive females. This is not a reliable procedure."

McCoy started to snap back, then realized that Spock was baiting him for a reason. Keeping me from brooding over my nightmare? Vulcan kindness! He grinned at Spock. "Well, you've gotta admit she's one hell of a woman."

"Are you quite certain that she is, in fact, a human female? You mentioned genetic anomalies."

"Wha--? Yes, she's a woman, dammit! No question about that. The genetic anomalies have to do with immunities and reproductive-cell damage, that's all. In fact..." McCoy eyed Spock thoughtfully. "She's exactly what Jim would be if he'd been born female, in a world like hers. Have you noticed how much her personality is like his?"

"I have not observed her behavior long enough to gather sufficient data to draw any conclusions on such a complex subject."

"Quite a mouthful -- and as phoney as it is long."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Come on Spock; you've seen the tapes as much as I have, and we've both met the lady. Really now, what do you think of her?"

Spock sighed. "It is inadvisable to rely on first impressions. All that I could say at this point is that Citizen Roantree is obviously strong, capable, intelligent, courageous and resourceful."

"Quite a list of virtues," McCoy chuckled. "But she's nobody's Girl Scout. Watch out for her, Spock. I saw that appraising look she gave you when she first came out of the Guardian, and I wouldn't be surprised if she made a play for you within the week."

"Highly unlikely," Spock almost snapped, his familiar face carefully frozen. "She is in mourning for her husband, who died less than two days ago, by her reckoning... I am not familiar with that idiom, Doctor, but I do not see why Citizen Roantree would wish in the near future to engage me in sporting activity. I should think that she would have other activities of higher priorities--"

"Nice recovery, Spock, but the initial fumble gave you away."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Never mind. Let's finish up the examination and get back to hunting Wheezes. Can't do much for Jim's psyche until we get that taken care of." McCoy went to the door, opened it, and bellowed "Next!" into the corridor.

Personal Log. Stardate 5897.7, John YellowHorse recording:

INCREDIBLE, SIMPLY INCREDIBLE. HAD DINNER WITH SOME OF THE ANARCHISTS AND I'M STILL BOGGLING. YES, I HAVE THE OTHER TIME TAPES AND... MEMORIES? WHATEVER. BUT THAT WASN'T QUITE ENOUGH PREPARATION FOR THE REALITY. THEY'RE TOUCHINGLY INNOCENT, HORRIFYINGLY BARBARIC, AND STRANGELY WISE -- BY TURNS. ONE NEVER KNOWS WHICH SIDE OF THEM IS GOING TO SHOW UP NEXT, AND

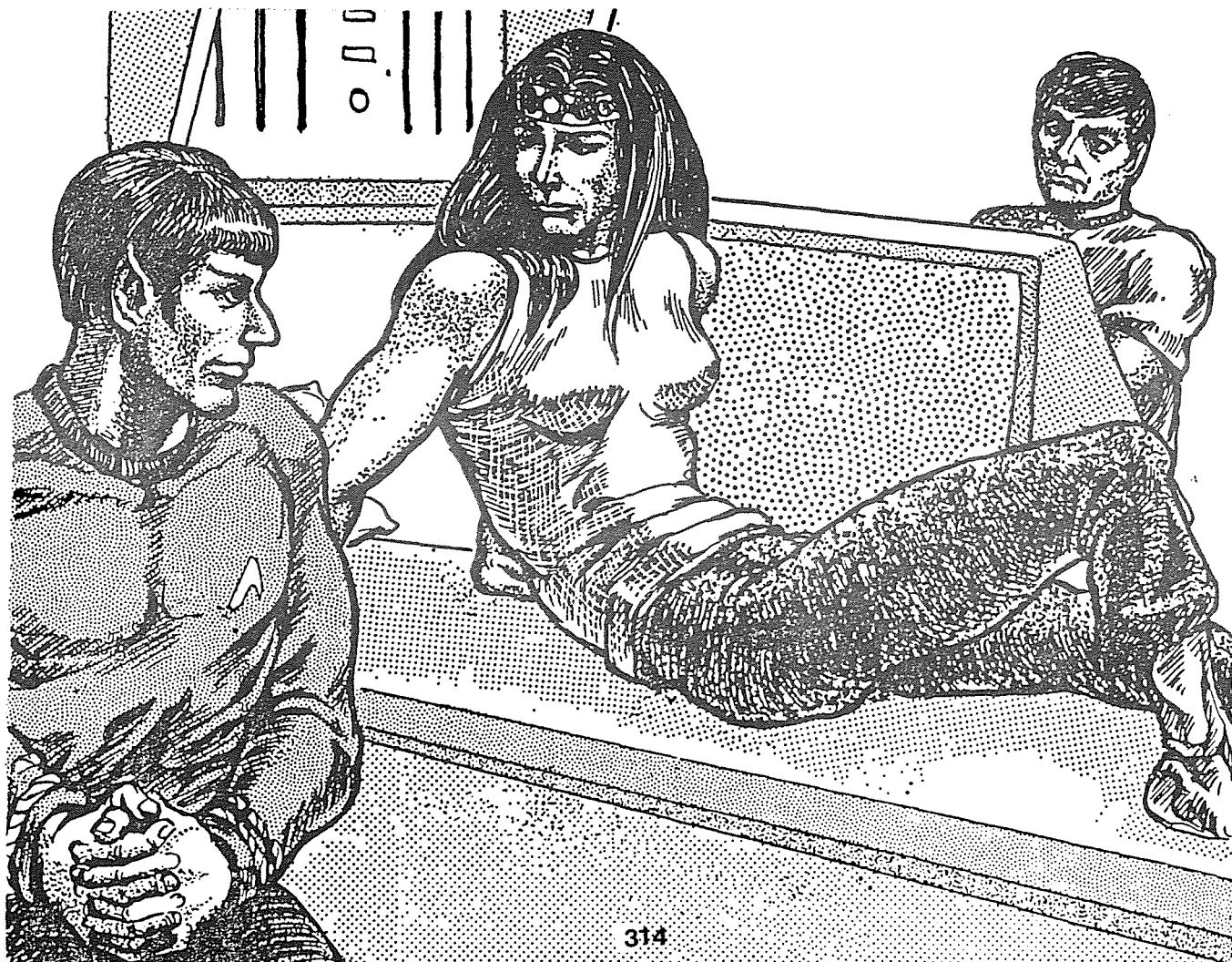
IT'S UNSETTLING.

I SAT BETWEEN 'HOT-TROT' PAULA DONNER AND ANN BAILEY, AND MANAGED TO LEAD THE CONVERSATION TO A DISCUSSION OF ETHICS AND RELIGION. I WAS PREPARED FOR THEIR ODD PAGANISM, BUT WHEN PAULA CASUALLY MENTIONED 'BEATING THE GODS INTO GOOD BEHAVIOR' I NEARLY DROPPED MY FORK. PRESSED FOR DETAILS, SHE LAUGHED AND DESCRIBED HOW PEOPLE 'THOUGH UP NEW CURSES AND USED 'EM ON HIAWATHA IF THE HUNTING WAS BAD'. THE DESCRIPTION REMINDED ME OF THE 'WARNING SECTION' OF THE FAMOUS ANDORIAN PRAYER TO BARKHORYU-OF-THE-RAINS. POSSIBLY THESE PEOPLE COULD GET ALONG WELL WITH THE ANDORIANS. WHO ELSE TREATS THEIR GODS WITH SUCH A CHEERFUL LACK OF REVERENCE? OR SHARES THEIR GRIMLY PRACTICAL REVERENCE FOR FOOD? OR THEIR CALM ACCEPTANCE OF INTERPERSONAL VIOLENCE?

THEN AGAIN, ANDORIANS HAVE GREAT RESPECT FOR THEIR FAMILIES AND ACCEPT THE WORD OF THE COUNCIL OF ELDERS AS LAW: THE ANARCHISTS USE 'LAW' AS A DIRTY WORD, EXCEPT WHEN DESCRIBING LAWS OF NATURE, AND DO NOT CONSIDER THE FAMILY AS SACRED. ANN BAILEY MADE A POINT OF EXPLAINING THAT 'MY KIN, RIGHT OR WRONG' WAS A DANGEROUS ATTITUDE. WHAT DO THEY CONSIDER SACRED THEN? 'LIFE, INTELLIGENCE, FREEDOM AND ART -- ART INCLUDING YOUR CRAFT, SKILL OR SCIENCE -- IN THAT ORDER.' ADMIRABLE ETHICS, BUT PECULIAR APPLICATION. INCREDIBLE PEOPLE! WHAT IN THE GALAXY ARE WE GOING TO DO WITH THEM? THEY DON'T FIT ANYWHERE! AND THEY WANT TO SETTLE ON EARTH...?

The last patient was Quannechota. She walked in quietly, took in the situation at a glance, came straight to the examination couch and climbed onto it. McCoy adjusted the instruments and promptly became absorbed in the readings. Quannechota kept her eyes calmly fixed on the ceiling. That intrigued Spock, and it took a moment to realize why: all the other Anarchists -- even Roantree -- had shown considerable interest in him. Apparently he was the first non-human they had met personally. Quannechota's lack of curiosity was unusual for any human, particularly under these circumstances. He wondered if she was concealing some irrational human fear of him, and considered various ways of putting her at ease.

"Citizen," he tried. "My condolences on the recent death of your husband."



Quannechota winced ever so slightly. "Thank you, Citizen," she said, turning expressionlessly toward Spock. "You are Jim's Vulcan?"

"I am Spock." Jim's Vulcan? What misconceptions do these people have concerning me? He noticed her eyes were deep brown. There was something disturbing familiar about those eyes, about the lines and angles of her face, about the timber and level of her voice. He was suddenly convinced that she was not Miramane, as the Captain believed. She was the analog of someone he knew well, though he couldn't quite recall whom, and the associations were not entirely pleasant. That is an emotional reaction, he caught himself. "I am a Vulcan."

Quannechota considered the two statements, flicked a glance at McCoy -- who was gaping over his instrument readings -- guessed that Spock was unwilling to discuss his relationship with Jim in public. Ask later, she decided. Next subject. Are you familiar with the Vulcan Science Academy?"

"I am." ...her voice so familiar. Sense of unpleasant... crowding, almost a repulsive closeness... Emotional -- stop. "I should have attended the Vulcan Science Academy, had I not joined Starfleet..." Why did I tell her that? Why am I reacting like this? Overwork? Stress?

"You joined Starfleet..." Quannechota sat up and stared at him, unexpected knowledge lighting in her mind. "And your father was not pleased."

Telepath! Spock jerked upright in sudden comprehension. She's a native human telepath-- "N-no, he was not pleased." Shield. Defenses... Despite his attempts to hold her out, the sense of eerie closeness remained. It took great effort to keep from scrambling away from her. "My father did not approve of Starfleet. He believed that peace should be founded in reason, not force -- such as Starfleet represents -- to him, anyway..." Have I said/thought too much? Shield!

"Yes..." Quannechota smiled grimly, her thoughts wandering off in another channel. "Peace usually does rest upon common sense. But all things have their season, and in time reason will lend -- all to sensibly -- to war. When there are two starving wolves and only one piece of meat, better that they should fight for it."

"Better? Why?" War, 'sensible'? By what logic does she--

"Because if they fight, one of them will take all the meat -- not to mention the flesh of the loser -- and so may live. If they do not fight, the meat will not be enough to sustain the two -- and both will starve. So it is with us, in the Time of the Bear. In my experience, pacifists are unaware of this; they seem to think that there is always enough meat for all the starving wolves, and that we may have nothing to fear except each other's fangs. There are not many pacifists on my Earth."

"Damn!" said McCoy, pausing over his instruments to give Quannechota a look of grudging admiration. "You know, that's the first sensible argument in favor of war that I've ever heard. Uh, Spock?"

Spock didn't answer. This unpleasant primitive had just tossed a philosophical bomb into his lap, and he didn't know how to disarm it. War resulting from overpopulation, insufficient food... inevitable. Is it better to die in combat, or of... Kroykah! "But most wars are not fought for that reason," was the best comeback he could manage.

"No, only the sensible ones. Most wars in our history were commanded by governments, which fight for power. People themselves are more likely to fight only for survival."

Spock gave McCoy a tight look. McCoy fiddled with his instruments and muttered, "You're not making this very easy... Uh, the examination, I mean." Lord, are you going to have trouble on Earth with an attitude like that!

"Your pardon, Doctor. I will lie still." Quannechota lay back down on the examination couch and became as immobile as a statue. "May I still speak? ...Thank you. Citizen Spock, have you any knowledge of the Biology department at the Vulcan Science Academy?"

"I have." Spock put her bothersome argument aside and concentrated on blocking out her psychic contact. It was difficult, but possible.

"Are the scientists there capable of genetic reconstruction?"

McCoy gulped, did a double-take, and then looked thoughtful.

"Specify," said Spock, in his most neutral voice. He knew how most humans reacted to the idea of 'genetic tinkering', but he wasn't sure how the barbarian woman would react, or just what she had in mind.

"I mean, would it be possible for the Scientists there to give me a healthy child?"

Spock didn't know whether to be relieved or horrified, then remembered that both reactions were emotional, and suppressed them. "It should be possible," he ventured. "But I cannot offer any certainty. I do not know the technical procedure. I am a scientist, not a doctor."

McCoy winced. Guannechota glanced at him, then turned back to Spock. "Please leave us, Citizen," she said. "I wish to speak privately with the Doctor."

Spock was extremely willing to leave. Without seeming to hurry, he took the shortest possible route out of the room -- which happened to lead to McCoy's office.

Guannechota waited until the doors closed behind him. "Doctor, what do your instruments tell you about my reproductive problem?" she asked.

McCoy started to take her hand, then decided against it. "It doesn't look good, Ma'am," he admitted. "Your chromosomes are so... oddly arranged that... well, technically, you're not exactly Human. The nearest I can compare you to is a Vulcanoid, except that you're red-blooded. There's a chance you could have good children with a Vulcan, but I doubt if there's a Human in the galaxy who could..." He shrugged, out of words.

"There is still the possibility of the Vulcan Science Academy."

"True, true..." ~~...if she could afford that... but maybe they'd do it for the chance just to study her...~~ "I imagine they'd be willing to exchange your knowledge for their genetics work."

Guannechota hesitated, almost embarrassed. "There is... some knowledge I would prefer not to give. Perhaps I could sell my holdings back in High Harbor... if I still own any..." She frowned. "r I could take this as my share of the reward."

~~"...Reward. Right." But, damn, they DID save the whole goddamn universe. They're entitled to expect... What? What can they really hope to get for all they've done? He fiddled with the viewer, taking another look at the readouts. They seem to think there are places, a culture, a life waiting for them back on Earth, that they can just step into... How do we explain? We must explain! We owe it to them... we owe them so damn much... and we've been treating them as just a social problem. It's unfair! It isn't right!~~

"Doctor," said Guannechota, sliding off the table and coming up beside him. "I think you did not say everything you know, either about the Vulcan Science Academy's arts or about me. Tell me now what you think the chances are that these Scientists could give me a proper child."

McCoy took a long look at her -- alive and healthy and strong as a draft-horse, and he looked again at the riddled genes displayed on the viewscreen, and he honestly could not come up with an answer. "I take it you've tried before," he hedged.

"Ten times. Not one came out right."

"Hmmm. In what way were they 'not right'?" McCoy peered at a magnified chromosome on the screen. "It might help if I could pinpoint the exact damage."

"Hypoencephaly," said Quannechota, her voice as expressionless as Spock's had been. "Philadelphianism. Spina Bifuda. Egg-bundle fetus."

"Uh..." McCoy clutched the edge of the diagnostic panel, abruptly dizzy. --can't even recognize all of them, but the ones I can... No. I am not going to be sick. He fixed his eyes on the chromosome display, trying to relate the stark-worded labels to the image on the screen. "I... don't know," he admitted. "I'll have to run it through the biocomp a few times, get Spock's help on figuring the odds, or we could get a message to the Vulcan Science Academy as soon as we come into range. I just don't know how long it'll take."

Quannechota turned away and sighed almost imperceptibly. "Let me know as soon as you are certain," she said, turning back to face McCoy. "And if it should be that I have no chance, then I will request to be sterilized. I am certain that your skill can accomplish that without doing me much damage."

"Y-yeah. Tie-tubes. Sage." ...sterilized... oh Jesus. That's one hell of a hyper-emotional word on Earth. Never fit in. Hopeless.

"Is there any need for me to stay here longer?"

"Stay... You mean, here in the examination room. Uh, no, I'm finished."

"Then I will go keep Jenneth company. Au revoir, Doctor."

"Bye." The minute she was gone, McCoy yanked the tapes out of the viewer, went to the medical library computer and looked up the genetic problems she'd named. For a couple of them, he had to look in the history section. The illustrations were ancient black and white photographs and a few even more ancient woodcut-engravings. Dear God, he thought, sweating. How long's it been since Humans had to deal with things like that? How would it affect a woman to... Ten times! Could she have survived psychologically if she weren't damn near-near as emotionless as Spock? Or is that the reason why...? He poked the buttons and looked up the definition of 'Egg-bundle Fetus', and studied it for exactly ten seconds before losing the battle with his stomach. He punched off the viewer and dashed for the bathroom.

He came out a few minutes later, much paler and very thoughtful. This time he picked up the psychotricorder tapes -- Jenneth's, Quannechota's, a handful of others' -- plugged them into the viewer and analyzed them carefully. Not normal, not exactly, he concluded. None of them are. But the hell of it is, the abnormalities aren't weaknesses. They're tougher, quicker, more resilient, smarter... He noted the IQ curve on Quannechota's tape. It almost went off the scale. Mentally and physically, they're incredible people. Tough world, tough survivors... survival of the fittest. What did Khan say about improving Man? It happened. Result of the Eugenics wars, but not the way Khan and his friends expected... He took out all the tapes but Quannechota's, leaned back and studied that one for a long time. Incredible intelligence, resilience, personality strength... But what a hell of a price!

"That is impossible," said a familiar voice behind him. "Doctor, there is obviously a malfunction in your instruments."

"Don't tell me my business, Spock. The instruments were checked and realigned this morning. There's nothing wrong with them."

"But this psychotricorder tape is obviously in error," Spock insisted. "It shows only a moderate psychic rating. I know from personal observation that Quannechota Two-Feathers is an extremely powerful telepath. During the examination, I had considerable difficulty blocking her out of my mind. This tape, taken at that same moment, shows only a mild surge of activity."

McCoy turned around slowly, staring at Spock, a totally wild idea taking form. "Spock, there is nothing wrong with the instruments. Are you sure you're not mistaken?"

"I am certain. If your instruments did not record the woman's unusual psychic ability, there must be some other explanation, but her powers are unquestionably real."

"Some other explanation..." McCoy repeated, still staring. You feel her thoughts... nobody else... doesn't even show on the instruments. Just you. You.

"I would recommend careful observation of the subject, to see how and when the phenomenon recurs." Spock was puzzled by McCoy's odd reaction, or lack of it. He tried again. "An untrained, unknowing or deliberately secretive telepath could present a problem, Doctor." McCoy only nodded slowly. Spock grew distinctly impatient with him. "In any case, I came to tell you that I believe I have identified the particular bacterium that is infecting the Captain."

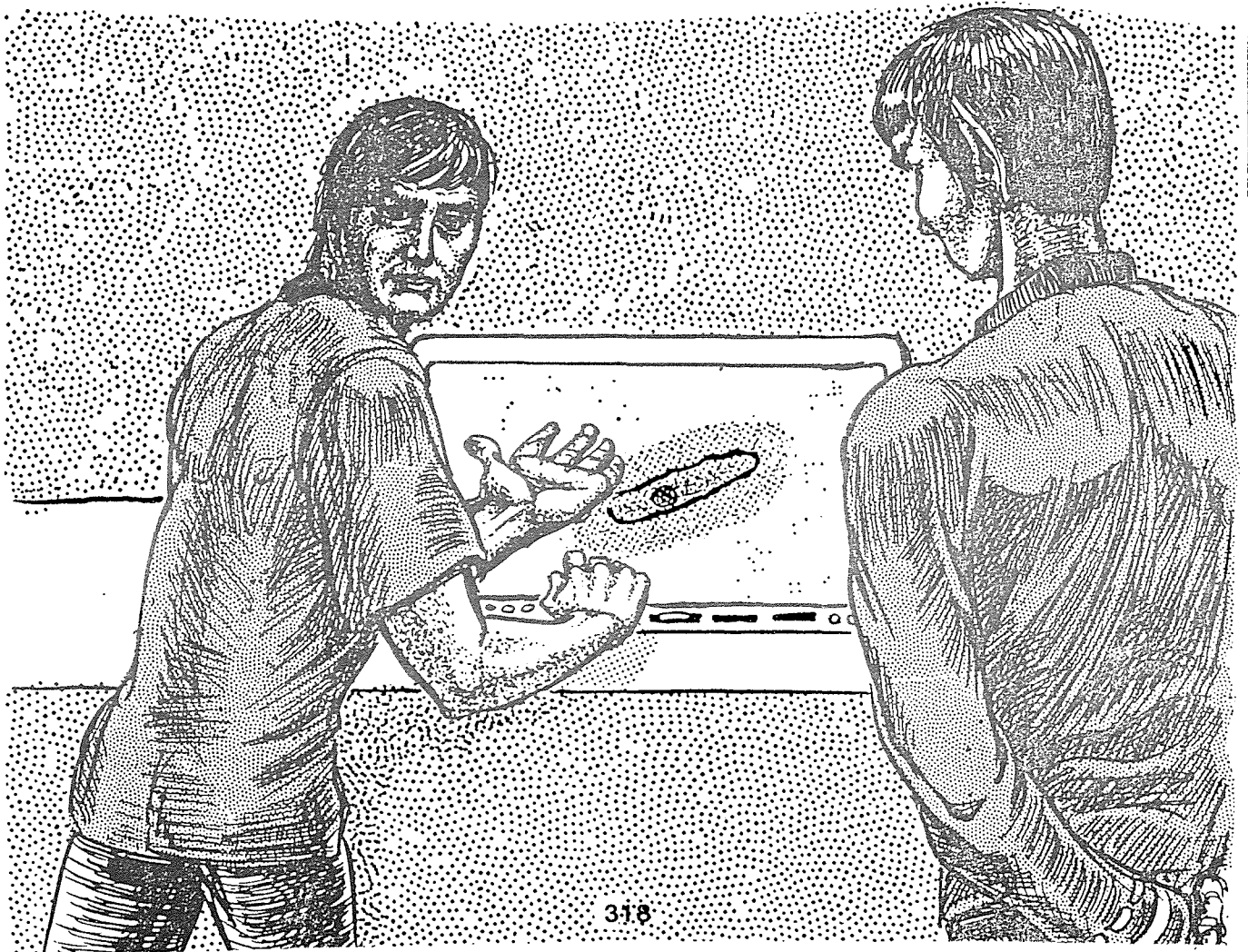
That brought McCoy out of his reverie, and out of his chair. "Show me!" he practically shouted.

Spock obligingly handed him a tape. McCoy yanked the other tape out of the viewer and tossed it aside, not noticing where it landed, and slapped the new tape into the viewer in its place. The screen displayed a new image: a magnification of a rod-shaped capsule-sheathed bacillus -- its featured familiar, its identity revealed.

"My Lord, that's it!" gasped McCoy. "...That's it?! Spock, there hasn't been a case of it in over 200 years!"

"Not in our universe, Doctor. Perhaps that is why the Captain had so little resistance to it. I believe there was a similar reaction when it was first introduced among the Eskimos."

"He had a little more resistance than an Eskimo; it used to kill them in a few weeks. Europeans often took years to die of it, but after so many infection-free generations maybe... Well, this is a slightly mutated form anyway. It's chewed him up royally. Just killing the bug won't be enough -- though the IBD alone can do that. I'll have to spend at least a week regenerating tissues. All that, from something that's been wiped out for 200 years!"



"It would be interesting to study the mechanism whereby the Anarchists became so rapidly immune."

"Immune! My Lord, to them it's a childhood disease! The White Plague! Tuberculosis! And they get over it! In a week! Your damn right I'd like to study their immune-mechanisms. I'd like to study every cell in their bodies and every thought in their minds. What kind of people could survive like that? Incredible people! I hope to high heaven that we can keep their friendship, their good will... Damn it, Spock, we've got to find a place somewhere in the Federation where they can fit in, be happy, keep their customs and still relate to the rest of the galaxy. They'd be such a valuable addition to society, if they'd only accept it."

"I could not agree more, Doctor." Now. Proper time to propose it. "After considering your attempts to infatuate the Anarchists with our science, I have taken the liberty of assigning the Social Science department to a program of acclimating the Anarchists to Federation society with all possible speed. Your assistance would be greatly appreciated."

If Spock had expected enthusiasm, he was disappointed. "'Acclimatizing'? Indoctrination, you mean," McCoy snapped, flicking off the viewer. "So their culture's already been so thoroughly contaminated by ours that you may as well finish the job? Teach them to marry like us, talk like us, tone down the easy violence and the weird paganism, and above all learn to accept having laws and rulers again? Count me out! I'm a doctor, not a sociologist. I'll be busy enough just handling their decontamination programs and putting Jim back together. Go find another stalking-horse."

Most illogical. Spock labeled him for the thousandth time. Use another approach. "When will the Anarchists be released from isolation?"

"The decon-program should be finished in another two days. There are some follow-up procedures -- the second cancer-shots, for example, or Roantree's operation -- but there's no need to keep them in Sickbay for that."

"Have you informed them of that?"

"No, haven't gotten around to it yet. Why?"

"I would appreciate it if you would refrain from doing so. The acclimation process could be handled much more easily if the Anarchists remain confined to Sickbay. You disapprove?"

"I'd rather not lie to them, if I can help it. I'd rather not play jailer, either. Besides, they're crowding up my Sickbay to the point where I can't treat anyone else, and that's downright dangerous. I want them out of here. Why don't you just confine them to quarters, or some damned thing?"

Was that meant to be sarcastic? Spock was hard put not to show irritation. "Doctor, you know as well as I do that we cannot, as yet, openly order the Anarchists to do anything. How would you suggest that I confine them to quarters, or to any part of the ship, without the excuse of disease-prevention?"

"I'm sure you can think of some 'logical' excuse; you're very good at that. Go tell your own lies. Don't make me do it for you."

Admirable ethics, but unfortunately poor strategy, Spock admitted silently. Your honor has a habit of emerging at inconvenient times.

McCoy took Spock's silence for cold disapproval. "Dammit Spock, the more we lie to these people the harder it'll go when they finally learn the truth! We can't treat them like fools, or enemies, or experimental animals; they deserve better than that from us, after everything they've done. I don't know what you think of Jenneth's people, but I -- I respect them too much to- to give them any more misconceptions than I have to." He looked away, unable to meet Spock's stare any longer.

Neither do I enjoy manipulating you, Spock thought, but at times that too is necessary. "I suggest a compromise, Doctor. I shall assign special quarters for our guests in an isolated part of the ship, near one of the lesser-used recreation and dining rooms. You shall explain to them that they should remain in this area because they are recovering from various ailments, are in need of rest and should not exert themselves, and also because it will be easier for them to

adjust to their new environment gradually. I shall send the social-science teams to teach them there, and they shall also have limited access to the library computer, which should keep them safely occupied during their training period. Will that satisfy you?"

"All right," McCoy conceded. "It isn't exactly lying. Now if you don't mind, I've got some treatment programs to set up for Jim and our... guests. Excuse me."

"As you wish." Spock's shoulders sagged a little as he watched McCoy stomp off.

Medical Log, Stardate 5980.5, McCoy Recording.

THE TREATMENTS ARE PROVING HIGHLY SUCCESSFUL, AND THE CAPTAIN IS RECOVERING RAPIDLY... PHYSICALLY, ANYWAY. THE INFECTION'S ABATED, OLD WHITE PLAGUE ROUTED COMPLETELY, AND I'VE MANAGED TO RESTORE THE DAMAGED TISSUES. THE MENTAL PROBLEM STILL REMAINS, THOUGH. HE'S STILL IN THAT STRANGE SELF-INDUCED COMA, AND THE PSYCHOTRICORDER READINGS ARE SO VAGUE AND ERRATIC THAT I DON'T DARE TRY ANY OF THE STANDARD REMEDIES. I'M GOING TO WAIT ANOTHER DAY TO SEE IF REGAINING HIS PHYSICAL HEALTH CHANGES ANYTHING, MAKES THE READINGS SETTLE DOWN.

JOHN B. IS WATCHING HIM MOST OF THE TIME, AND MAYBE HE'LL NOTICE SOMETHING THAT I HAVEN'T -- I HOPE.

THE REST OF THE ANARCHISTS HAVE BEEN MOVED OUT OF SICKBAY AND INTO, IF YOU PLEASE, THE V.I.P. QUARTERS ON DECK 10. THEY SEEM VERY IMPRESSED WITH THEIR NEW CABINS, QUITE WILLING TO LEAN BACK AND REST, PLAY WITH THE LIBRARY COMPUTER AND THE FOOD AND CLOTHING SYNTHESIZERS, CHAT WITH THE SOCIAL SCIENTISTS AND FOLLOW DOCTOR'S ORDERS... DAMN.

WELL, THEY'RE OUT OF MY SICKBAY, ANYWAY. I'VE GOT REGULAR CREWMEN COMING IN BY THE DOZENS WITH ALL SORTS OF COMPLAINTS, MOSTLY PSYCHOSOMATIC, AND ALL OF 'EM PLAGUED BY DOUBLE-MEMORIES. I'VE RUN ROUTINE PHYSICALS, FOUND NOTHING OUTSTANDING, AND SET NURSE CHAPEL TO GOING OVER 'EM IN DETAIL WHILE I MOSTLY HAND OUT TRANQUILIZERS. IT'S A GOOD THING WE'VE GOT NO ASSIGNMENTS BUT A LONG, LEISURELY CRUISE HOME.

Quannechota worked quietly at the terminal, taking care not to waken Roantree. The Coordinator had spent too many nights lately kept awake by grief and depression, and the returning need for sleep was a good sign. The silence was welcome too; Roantree's choice of personal tranquilizers ran to a little brandy, a lot of pipeweed and almost constant playing of those music tapes. As the pipeweed ran out the dosage of the music increased and this was the first time in days that the cabin had been silent. Quannechota enjoyed the music herself, but Sparks' last gift included several Songs of Power, and dealing with them had been... distracting. For herself, she preferred to deal with sorrow by burying herself in work.

At present, she was studying the various worlds of the Alliance. It was fascinating to see all the different geologies, people, histories and customs -- even in the spare and piece-meal survey-contact reports. Quannechota wondered why so many of the reports seemed so shitty and incomplete; certainly a people with such advanced Science should know how to be thorough and systematic in their explorations. Going through the long list of worlds in simple alphabetical order, she came across the names of long-settled and long-known planets. Now for some proper details. in properly thorough arrangement... she thought, eagerly punching the buttons for a full readout on the history, economics and sociology of the planet Ardana.

The words obligingly flickered to life on the screen, laid out in neat paragraphs like the printing in a good history text. There were great gaps of space between the paragraphs. ...as if great chunks of information have been excised, thought Quannechota, distinctly annoyed. "Open for voice instructions," she snapped, barely remembering to keep her voice low. "Compare full data in memory banks concerning Ardana with information displayed on screen 1047. Is there data not displayed?"

"Affirmative."

"Display it."

"Unable to comply. Non-displayed information voice-locked by Science Officer Spock."

Quannechota took a deep breath and let it out slowly. No, she told herself, I shall not become annoyed at this childishness. There are ways around it... She poked more buttons and called for a full readout of ship's-log tapes concerning recent contact with Ardana. The computer obliged with a full-color visual display and a full sound audio-track. Quannechota sat back to watch.

"Captain's Log, Stardate 5818.4..." the tape began. It ran for all of 30 seconds before the gaps started appearing. Quannechota leaned forward, frowning in disbelief and annoyance. The tape ran on, words and whole sentences and occasional images cut roughly, as if someone had chopped at the soundtrack with a hatchet. Quannechota struggled to make some sense of the mingled record; as near as she could tell, it involved an enslavement question -- a wealthy cloud-dwelling people enriching themselves off the zienite trade while the miners dug the ore and took the risks and received almost nothing for it, until the miners finally gained the sense to go on strike. Apparently Kirk had dealt directly with the miners, trading some sort of health-and-safety supplies for the ore, but just how he had handled the obnoxious trade-lords of the cloud city was unclear. Was Jim ashamed of leaving those wretched slave-masters alive? She stopped the tape, rewound it, and summoned the computer-voice again. "Restore the missing portions of the log-tape."

"Unable to comply. Non-displayed information voice-locked by Science Officer Spock."

"Tete-de-merde!" snapped Quannechota, punching off the computer. She thought for a moment, glanced around to confirm that Roantree was still asleep, then flicked on the intercom and contacted the cabin assigned to Ann Bailey.

Personal Log, Stardate 5908, John YellowHorse Recording:

LUNCH WITH THE ANARCHISTS CAN PROVE HAZARDOUS TO THE NERVOUS SYSTEM, ESPECIALLY WHEN UNEXPECTED GUESTS SHOW UP. MR. SCOTT WALKED IN WHILE I WAS CHATTING WITH ANN BAILEY -- WHO WAS IN AN UNCERTAIN MOOD TO BEGIN WITH -- AND HE SAT DOWN AT THE OTHER SIDE OF ME. IT SOON BECAME OBVIOUS THAT BOTH WERE TALKING GUARDEDLY TO EACH OTHER WITH ME AS A BUFFER. I CAN'T SAY I ENJOYED THE EXPERIENCE, THOUGH IT WAS INFORMATIVE.

NEITHER ROANTREE OR QUANNECHOTA BEING PRESENT, THERE WASN'T MUCH SINGING; THE AUDIENCE WAS QUITE RECEPTIVE, THEN, WHEN 'HOT-TROT' VENTURED TO SING AN ANCIENT BALLAD. THE SONG WAS AMAZINGLY CRUEL AND BLOODTHIRSTY, CONCERNING AN ANCIENT NOBLEMAN WHO HAS 'KILLED A GALLANT SQUIRE' AND RUNS FROM PURSUIT TO 'A NURSE THAT DID BEFRIEND HIM'; SHE SHOWS HIM A PLACE TO HIDE, BUT THEN ULTIMATELY BETRAYS HIS WHEREABOUTS TO THE PURSUERS ON THE SOLE CONDITION THAT THEY KILL HIM QUICKLY AND PAINLESSLY IN HIS SLEEP. THE PURSUERS FIND THE HERO ASLEEP, BUT DECIDE THAT IT WOULD SHAME THEM TO KILL A SLEEPING MAN, SO THEY LET HIM FINISH HIS SLEEP AND THEN KILL HIM WHEN HE WAKENS. IN THE LAST VERSE, THE KILLERS STICK THE HERO'S HEAD ON A SPEAR, CUT OUT HIS HEART AND GIVE IT TO THE NURSE WHO BETRAYED HIM.

OF COURSE I POINTED OUT THE TERRIBLE CRUELTY OF THE STORY, BUT BAILEY INSISTED THAT THE BEHAVIOR OF THE PURSUERS WAS, IF YOU PLEASE, 'ONLY FAIR'! SHE EXPLAINED THAT 'IN OLDEN TIMES A SQUIRE WAS A KNIGHT'S SERVANT, SO WHAT THIS KNIGHT DID WAS KILL A POOR SLAVEY. DAMN RIGHT, PEOPLE WENT AFTER HIM AND THE NURSE TOLD 'EM WHERE HE'D GONE.' NO ARGUMENT WOULD MOVE HER FROM THIS POINT. WORSE STILL, MR. SCOTT AGREED WITH HER! SHE EVEN OFFERED A JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CORPSE MUTILATION OF THE LAST VERSE, SAYING THAT THE CUTTING OFF OF THE HEAD WAS A NECESSARY PROOF TO THE COMMUNITY THAT THE MALEFACTOR WAS INDEED DEAD; GIVING THE HEART TO A 'FRIEND' WAS, IF YOU PLEASE, MEANT TO BE A KINDNESS! 'THERE'S A LEGEND THAT THE SPIRITS OF THE DEAD TEND TO HANG AROUND MOST WHERE THEIR HEARTS ARE,' SHE EXPLAINED, 'SO IF THE FRIEND HAD ANY OF 'THE GIFT', SHE COULD SUMMON HIS SPIRIT AND SPEAK TO HIM'. LOGICAL, AS MR. SPOCK WOULD SAY, BUT TOTALLY INCOMPATIBLE WITH THE STANDARDS OF ANY CIVILIZED WORLD.

NEEDLESS TO ADD, I HAD NO FURTHER SUCCESS IN SEEDING STANDARD EARTH-CULTURE OR EVEN GENERAL FEDERATION SOCIAL ETHICS INTO THEIR VALUE-SYSTEM. FRANKLY, RE-EDUCATING THESE PEOPLE IS A PROJECT FOR YEARS, NOT WEEKS. I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO TELL MR. SPOCK, BUT OUR ACCLIMIZATION PROJECT IS DEFINITELY NOT A SUCCESS. I'M SERIOUSLY TRYING TO FIND WAYS TO EXPLAIN TO STARFLEET THAT THESE PEOPLE WOULD DO BEST ON A WORLD ALL THEIR OWN -- IF THEY'D BE WILLING TO TAKE THAT, INSTEAD OF THEIR HOPELESSLY LOST EARTH. FRANKLY, I CAN FORESEE NO OTHER FUTURE FOR THEM EXCEPT AS SOME SORT OF SPACE-GYPSIES, TRADESMEN WANDERING FROM PLANET TO PLANET, INTERACTING WITH ALL BUT RESIDING WITH NONE. WOULD THEY BE CONTENT WITH THAT?

Jean Battre-le-Diable walked quietly into the soft-lit intensive-care unit and tiptoed up to the couch. Almost holding

his breath, he studied the mechanical indicators, peered down at the still figure under the blankets, and searched for something, anything, that might give him some hint of what was ailing Big Jim and what he could do to help. The Braider had told him all she knew; she'd tried at his insistence to contact Jim through the mind-link -- tried until she passed out -- and came back with no other news than that he was hiding as far down as his mind could go. No further clues, the little Biologist sighed to himself, except possibly unconscious ones... He turned up the light a little, drawing an annoyed glance from the duty-nurse, and looked again.

...wait un moment... there is something... the way he is lying...

Jean turned to the duty-nurse, absently tugging the ends of his moustache. "Citizen, did you put him in that position, or did he do it himself? Did anyone lay him out with his arms raised like that?"

"Nobody's touched him, to my knowledge. Why?"

"Significant, if he did it himself... Sprawled, legs extended, feet wide apart, head back, arms up... like a victim on the rack, or a loose-limbed crucifixion... throat bared, as if to a knife... Ah."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Look you, Citizen: the whole pose suggests complete helplessness, total surrender, as if he were saying 'Come and kill me'. Is that not significant to you?"

"What, Captain Kirk saying that? No, that's impossible. Everyone knows he's not the kind of man who ever gives up!"

"Nonetheless, that is what I see. I shall go speak of it to McCoy." Jean stomped out, annoyed that some of the medical personnel on this ship-of-wonders could be so dense. He forgot his annoyance as he came into McCoy's office and found the Doctor arguing incredulously with Nurse Chapel.

"Doctor, I double-checked every last tape. I called back a dozen patients for another reading. I scanned, analyzed, computer matched right down to the molecular level. There is no mistake!"

"But dammit, Nurse, there's no way they could have been exposed to it!" McCoy sounded oddly defensive, almost desperate. "Nobody -- and I mean nobody -- beamed down except Spock and myself. Nobody has had contact with Jim except us and Jenneth's people and the medical staff, and we don't show any signs of it, do we?"

"Yes, some of us do, Doctor."

"...Some? Only some? But all possible carriers were decontaminated a week ago, and we took precautions... Nurse, this doesn't make any sense! How could all those crewmen, who didn't leave the ship and haven't had any contact, pick up a disease that's been extinct for 200 years?"

"I don't pretend to know, Doctor, but the fact is that it's here. I can only recommend that we run tests on the entire crew."

"Fine! With the shape their nerves are in, it would start a panic! We'll have to keep quiet about what we're looking for... Hell, it'll have to be done. All right, get hold of Spock and explain."

"Er, excuse me, Doctors," Jean tried to cut in. "If you are not too busy, there is something--"

"Not now, Jean. We're busy," McCoy snapped, looking as if he were trying hard to live up to the words he'd just said. "Jes' take a seat and I'll get to you in a minute. Nurse, have you reached Spock yet?"

Jean took the nearest chair, sat down on it and stewed with irritation while McCoy crabbled at Spock over the intercom. Patience, people to worry about... Nonetheless, he steamed with annoyance while Spock and McCoy nattered at each other over the intercom. He was still peeved by the time McCoy had finished the conversation, made various medical arrangements, and

got around to remembering him.

"Now, what was it you had in mind, Jean?" McCoy's attention was sharp and genuine, but he gave the little Biologist the odd impression that he was trying furiously to keep his mind occupied.

"Something important, I think," said Jean, a little snappish. "You say the Wheezes -- the Tuberculosis -- is cured, the damage undone, yet Big Jim still lies buried in his own mind, and you don't know how to reach him."

"Yes, dammit. I admit I'm stumped. You have any ideas?"

"I think so. Come with me, s'il vous plait."

Dubious but interested, McCoy followed Battre-le-Diable into the intensive care unit and studied the motionless body on the couch while Jean explained his theory again. McCoy listened, looked, considered his psychotricorder readings of the last few days, and grudgingly concluded that the little Anarchist had a damn good point. "All right, it looks likely. But why should he feel like that? Why should he want to be dead? I've never known Jim Kirk to give up completely, not like that, never in his life."

"The Braider says that he made one such attempt, back in our time-line, when Dr. M'Benga declared him unfit to be Coord... Captain."

"But that was different. He was maimed, lost, guilt-stricken, without hope. It isn't like that now; the ordeal is over."

"Has he ever endured an ordeal as long and terrible as this?"

"Uh... No." Hell, what could we expect? Everyone has a breaking point... even heroes can be tortured beyond bearing. What he's been through would have shattered anyone else, long since. No wonder he wanted to retreat for a while... but this far? Retreat all the way into death? It makes no sense. "But why this, Jean? The long struggle is over, and he's won. It's finished."

"That is not certain. There may be something more, one more task or ordeal, that he has no strength to face."

"What in the hell could that be?" The only left-over detail of this whole mess is finding a place in society for Jenneth's people... and that can't be so terrible... unless there's something else...

"It can only be the Joining. When the universes came together, they blended through him and with him. He is the composite of two selves, from two time-lines. Didn't Jenneth tell you that?"

"Yes. Yes, she did..." And I didn't want to believe it! I wouldn't consider -- Just now, when Christine brought me the proof-- "Oh my God..." McCoy dropped into the duty nurse's chair and began to shake. "Bad enough for the rest, who just think it's psychic bleed-over from another universe. Worse for me, knowing they're real memories and I... really died." He clutched his shoulders and squeezed hard, as if wringing the trembling out of them. "God only knows what it's like for him. He was right in the center, took it cold, with no comfortable doubts to cushion the shock... My lord. Jean, do you think he's... still doubled? Not completely converged? Two minds locked up in one body, as Jenneth said?"

"I see no reason to doubt the Braider," said Jean stoutly. "If she says so, it is highly probable. That may very well be the thing he has no strength to face."

"What can I do? How do I reach him? I want to help!"

"He may not know that. We don't know exactly what the Guardian did to him, or what he saw or thought or felt when he came out of it. Perhaps he does not truly believe that he is home, or that there is anyone who can help him. You must prove it to him."

"Prove it? How?"

"Hmmm... Counter-argument, at the deepest level. Yes, you must show him in the simplest terms that the time of pain is over -- that he's come home, his friends are with him, and that all will be well now. It must be done at the deep level in order to reach him." Jean cocked his head to one side and gave McCoy a bright, bird-like smile. "Remind him that life is good, Doctor. You are one of those most qualified to do that, being his dearly loved friend."

"Huh?" McCoy puzzled over Jean's knowing look. "I don't quite understand. How am I supposed to do all that?"

"You don't know?" Battre-le-Diable did a classic double-take. "Uh... But of course. Your people didn't know of 'Lomi technique either, much less all its applications. You people don't touch each other very much, do you? Huh! Formality is all very well, but there comes a point when it is most dysfunctional..."

"Get to the point!"

"Very well, I shall be blunt. Doctor, you are his friend -- a friend who he fought his way across time to find. Make it clear to him, in direct physical terms, that's he's found you. Take off your boots and get into that bed with him."

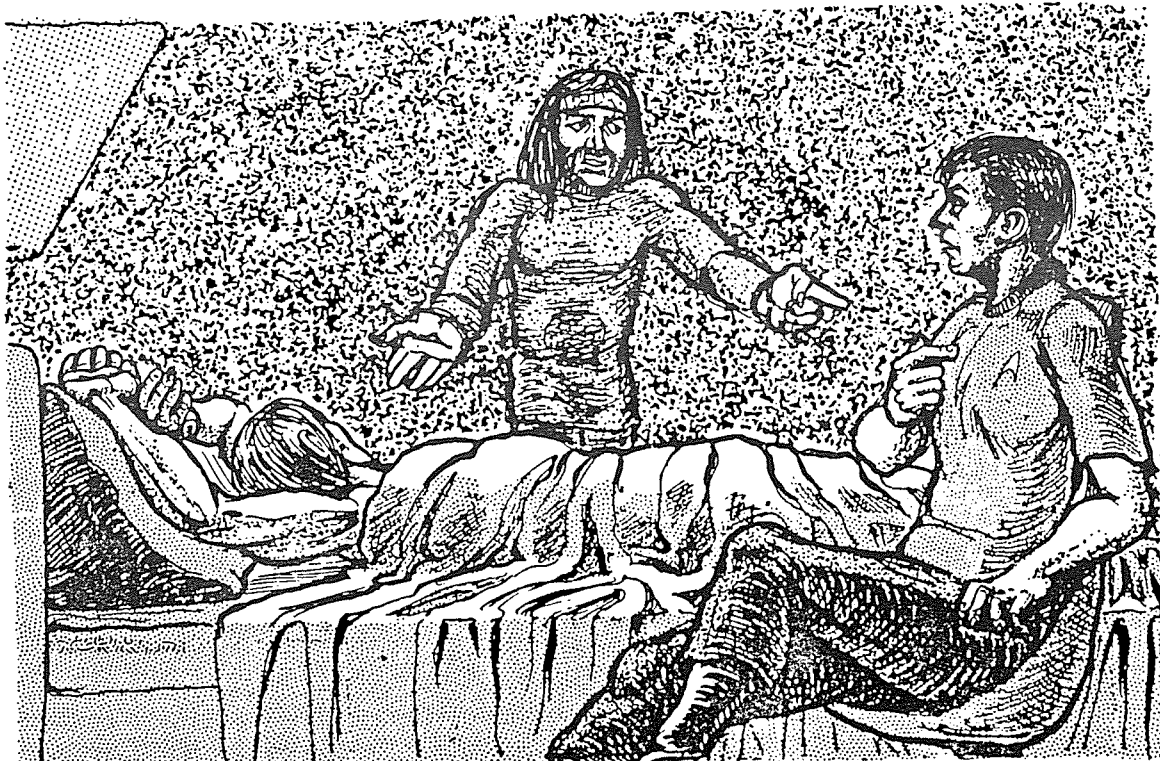
"What?!" squawked McCoy, almost falling out of his chair.

"You prefer to keep your boots on?"

"Uh... no. I mean, I -- I'm not sure I understand you. Exactly what am I supposed to do?"

"Par tous les dieux, must I explain every move?" Jean tugged his moustache. "Climb in beside him. Wrap him in your arms. Hug him and pet him as if you were calming a frightened child or a hurt animal, which perhaps is not very far off the mark. Also, talk to him."

"... 'bout what?" McCoy gulped.



"It doesn't matter, only your tone of voice will get through -- and perhaps he may hear you if you call his name. Just keep talking. It will take too much time, I imagine..." He gave McCoy a suspicious measuring glance. "Don't you want to do it?"

"Er, of course I do." McCoy began tugging off his boots. What the hell, he considered, it might work, at that. Physical contact... 'brute love', they once called it... I'm not too damned civilized to try... willing to try anything at this point... "Go tell Christine where I am, and see to it that we're not disturbed, will you?"

"Certainement. Christine Chapel-Doctor coordinates Sickbay when you are not there, n'est-ce pas? Good. To her I go. Au revoir... et bonne chance."

"Right," said McCoy as the doors closed. Good 'ol Chris, she can handle them... doing a damn fine job as interpreter, ambassador, what have you... hope she's the only one who finds out about this... He got up and went to the couch, glanced at the indicators and then back at Kirk. Hell, quit stalling, and get on with it!

He started to stretch out beside Kirk, stopped, then pulled back the blanket and slipped under it. Get as much contact as possible, he thought, sliding next to the limp, motionless body. Hey, no clothes? Damn!... No, it's just as well, McCoy sighed to himself, burrowing one arm under Kirk's shoulders and pulling him close. Plenty of contact... damned embarrassing, never live it down... hell, who cares? Nothing else matters if this works. Just help Jim??? With his other hand he turned Kirk's sleeping face toward him and ran his fingers through the tangled dark-bronze hair, moving in slow, gentle, calming circles. "Jim?" he whispered into an unresponsive ear. "Jim, it's me, Bones. You're home. You're back on the Enterprise. It's all right, Jim. Everything's going to be all right, now. You can wake up, and we won't be gone. Can you hear me, Jim? Sure, you can hear me. Come on back..." The words slipped into a steady chant, and McCoy slowly worked his hands down Kirk's face, down his neck and across his shoulder. Still there was no response. Patience, McCoy reminded himself. This is bound to take a long time...

Project Tape R-236, Roantree recording:

ENOUGH, I'VE BEEN LYING AROUND HERE LONG ENOUGH, NEARLY TWO WEEKS, JUST DREAMING AND REMEMBERING AND GETTING OVER MY LOSSES AND TRYING TO GET USED TO BEING HERE... ENOUGH OF THAT. TIME I TURNED BACK TOWARD LIVING, MOVING AHEAD, FINDING A PLACE IN PARADISE. ...AND TIME I HAD THAT OPERATION, TOO.

I'VE GOT TO THINK ABOUT WHAT WE'LL DO WHEN WE GET BACK TO EARTH, FIND OUT WHAT THE REST OF THE CREW WANTS FOR THEIR SHARE OF THE REWARD, START COORDINATING EXPORTS AGAIN. I'LL HAVE LUNCH WITH THEM TODAY, FOR A CHANGE, AND SEE HOW THEY'RE DOING. IT WOULDN'T HURT TO START PLANNING FOR THE NEXT FULL-MOON CELEBRATION, EITHER. I HOPE THOSE NAGGY SOCIAL SCIENTISTS DON'T WANT TO SIT IN ON THAT! THEY'VE BEEN A TRIFLE PESKY LATELY, AND FULL-MOON ISN'T A GOOD SETTING FOR SUCH ANNOYANCES, LEST THINGS GET A BIT OUT OF HAND. I WISH JIM COULD...

NO, DELETE THAT. HE'S STILL SICK, HURT, HIDING. I DON'T BLAME HIM. LET HIM REST: HE NEEDS MORE OF IT THEN WE DO. FOR MYSELF, IT'S HIGH TIME I WENT BACK TO SICKBAY FOR THAT OPERATION. AFTER ALL THIS TIME IT'S ALMOST TOO MUCH TO BELIEVE THAT I'LL HAVE MY FERTILITY AGAIN. THAT EVEN QUANNA MIGHT... YES, MIRACLES! YES! ACCEPT PARADISE. START GETTING USED TO IT. TODAY. ROANTREE OUT.

Spock walked into Sickbay just as the argument reached the shouting stage. Fortunately, the usual reaction to his presence occurred; everyone turned to look at him and stopped talking for approximately 1.8 seconds. Spock took advantage of the pause to ask, in his iciest tone: "Is there some reason for this uproar?"

"Just a personal disagreement," Christine soothed. "If you'll come this way, I want to--"

"It is a matter of personal choice," insisted Quannechota, dark eyes flaring in her set face.

"This woman is scheduled for surgery, and she doesn't want me to do it," M'Benga complained, pointing to Roantree.

"Damn right I don't!" Roantree's voice had undertones of thunder in it. Her eyes seemed to glow green, and the taut muscles in her neck and shoulders stood up like cables under the skin. She looked like a tigress ready to pounce. She looked extremely dangerous. She also looked horrifying like Captain Kirk. "That man was cruel and arrogant with Quannechota when she had her last miscarriage. She doesn't trust him, and that's good enough reason for me not to trust him either -- especially not with my fertility! If Dr. McCoy isn't here to do the operation, I'll come back after lunch and wait for him. I'm not taking chances with this character."

"Obviously hysterical," sniffed M'Benga, turning to Spock.

"Perhaps it would be best, Doctor," Spock suggested, "If you would deal with the more pressing problem of conducting the examinations of the regular crew. This patient would risk no damage by waiting for Dr. McCoy, and the other patients are in greater need of attention."

"Just as you say, Sir," M'Benga grudgingly agreed, turning away.

At the word 'sir' the Anarchists gasped and turned round-eyed glances on Spock. They backed away from M'Benga, as if his imminent doom might be contagious. Christine considered giving M'Benga a good kick for that slip, then decided to catch him alone later. Talking to Spock was much more important. She finger waved frantic hand-signals to him. Spock, missing none of this, raised an eyebrow and carefully turned his back on M'Benga. The Anarchists sagged slightly with relief, marveling at Spock for his even temper and vast patience with insults.

"Nurse Chapel, you said you had some important data to show me." Spock turned to the problem at hand. "Does it concern the Captain's condition?"

"No, Mr. Spock." Christine held out a handful of tapes. It concerns the question of converging time-lines. I think we have proof. These are the reports of the physical examinations given to the crew. There's a definite pattern here which I think you should check."

"Then the indication shown in the random observations has been confirmed?" Spock took the tapes.

"Yes. Every crewman who came back to the Enterprise in that other time-line shows definite exposure to Tuberculosis in this one. There's no mistake, and there's no other way they could have caught it. The disease has been extinct in this time-line for 200 years."

"Incredible," Spock murmured, staring at the tapes. The uppermost of them had Christine Chapel's name on it. "Proof, not only the Coordinator's subjective impression... or the odd device Mr. Scott discovered. The vivid memories are not merely psychic bleedings from the other time-line."

"No, they're our own memories. We've all been blended -- like the Captain -- with our other selves. It was just easier for us, because we were outside the Guardian..." She paused, then decided not to get into that subject just yet. "When we were... converged, we kept some of the things that were different there: our memories and our immune-reactions. We're fortunate that none of us were exposed to the disease -- and other things -- as long and heavily as the Captain."

"Convergence..." Spock turned the tapes over and over in his hands. "The one exception appears to be myself. I have memories of seeing Pennington killed, also contradictory memories in which she simply walked away and was never seen again..." He frowned, not really wanting to go into that. "But I have no memories of living in Roantree's universe, as Dr. McCoy does."

Christine bit back the words that were on the tip of her tongue. No, she reminded herself, it's only a guess. I wasn't sure then... there... and I'm not sure now.

"Of course it is possible that I simply was never born in that time-line," Spock reconsidered, "Since that Earth had no contact with Vulcan, and that Sarek had no son of my description."

"Or it might be," Christine hinted, "That you weren't converged with you... match, because that person is still alive and separate -- among the Anarchists."

Spock raised both eyebrows, thumbed through his knowledge of the 41 bizarre passengers, and rejected the whole idea. "Impossible. I am a Vulcan. Despite my genetic background, my physical and mental nature are primarily Vulcan. None of the Anarchists are Vulcans, nor anything remotely resembling Vulcans. The only possible conclusion is that I simply was not born in their universe."

"It was only a thought," Christine shrugged. He's probably right... hard to argue with the biological facts... check that tape again... compare with him...

"What is Dr. McCoy's theory concerning this unexpected evidence?"

"Huh? Oh, the completed exams, you mean? I don't know. I haven't seen him since you talked to him this morning. He's busy with the Captain, experimenting with... uhm, a new treatment."

"Let us hope he returns soon. Our guests require his services, and they are not particularly patient people."

"Well, perhaps if you talked to them, Mr. Spock..." She shrugged meaningfully.

Spock noted that, and added to the other bits of data which indicated that Christine Chapel, too, had changed. She was right, of course. He turned and went over to the Anarchists.

Christine remembered her earlier thought and rummaged through the tapes on the desk, looking for Quannechota's. To her dismay, she couldn't find it.

"Citizen Roantree," Spock began, "Dr. McCoy is presently busy with... your brother. I do not know how long he will be thus engaged."

"That's all right," Roantree smiled, looking Spock up and down. "There's no reason to rush him for me. Another few hours, or even days, won't hurt. How's Jim doing?"

"You are in a better position to know that than I."

"True..." Roantree looked abstracted for a moment, then shook her head. "There's some change. Just a little. I can't look any closer. ...Ah, if you're not too busy, why don't you come to lunch with us? We can show you how to get pretty good beer out of the food synthesizer, and we all have a lot to talk about."

Spock considered her offer for a full three seconds before rejecting it. "I regret," he admitted, "that at present I have other obligations. Later, perhaps after my... shift ends, I may be able to accomodate you."

He had meant only that he'd have more spare time by the next watch, but Quannechota took it the wrong way. "You need not fear to be contaminated by our presence, Citizen," she said expressionlessly. "After so many days in close proximity to us, you have already caught everything contagious that we might be carrying."

"Quanna..." said Roantree, catching her arm.

Spock decided that he did not like Quannechota. "I assure you, Citizen," he replied, just as coolly, "I had no such considerations in mind. I am, as I said, busy. In any case, I strongly doubt that any microorganisms you might be carrying could infect a Vulcan." With that, he turned on his heel and marched through the door, leaving Roantree glaring at Quannechota.

"Mr. Spock, wait a minute." Nurse Chapel stopped him. "What's wrong with your face?"

"To the best of my knowledge, there is nothing wrong with my face." Nonetheless, Spock stopped where he was and carefully felt his cheeks and chin.

"Yes there is," Christine insisted, coming up to him. "You've got a rash of some sort on your jaw. It's just starting, but it's definitely there. Oh, it's on your hands too! You'd better come over here to the diagnostic couch. Dr. M'Benga, come in here please!"

"It would appear," murmured Guannechota, "That he spoke too soon."

"Quanna," Roantree demanded, "Just why the hell are you being so bitchy to him?"

"I do not enjoy being patronized." Guannechota frowned at an empty spot in the air. "Jenneth, do you not have the impression that these new people look down on us? They treat us with a subtle, almost unconscious sense of superiority. Perhaps part of it is unavoidable, seeing that their science is far in advance of ours, and it would be very easy for them to think of us poor relations, quaintly old-fashioned provincials..."

"Enough," snapped Roantree, uncomfortable with that line of reasoning. "There's probably a little of that in their minds, true, but it'll be outweighed by gratitude when they get used to the idea of what we've done for them. Besides, we won't win their respect any faster by sniping at them. Cool off, Quanna. You can catch more flies with honey than vinegar."

"True," Guannechota shrugged and headed for the door.

"Djamballa, it's the same thing!" M'Benga almost shouted. "He must have caught it from the Captain. But with him it's breaking out on the skin. Incredible! This must be the first case of Tubercular Lupus ever discovered in a Vulcan. Hmm, progressing amazingly fast, too."

Spock turned pale under his blossoming rash.

"Well, Mr. Spock." Christine grinned ruefully, "One extra-strength dose of Instant Bug Death coming up. Welcome to the club."

* * *

The lunch party was moderately large and comparatively quiet; the Anarchists had gotten back in to the habit of eating their meals together, but they saved most of their feasting and celebrating for dinnertime. There was only a moderate amount of beer, very little pipeweed, some singing but no dancing. The Anarchists were, in fact, in a quietly contented and thoughtful mood, generally discussing what they hoped to do when they got back to Earth. The various social-science teams scattered among the tables were a little dismayed; from the direction of the conversations, they hadn't had much success at teaching the Anarchists anything of Earth customs or Federation manners.

Roantree was present, but not singing at the moment. John YellowHorse ventured to take a chair next to her, which put Ann Bailey on his other side. Good position to start, he thought. Sway these two and the others might follow... To his annoyance, Commander Scott chose that moment to walk in, survey the scene, come over to the table and take a seat not too far from Ann Bailey. John YellowHorse glared at him, but Scott didn't seem to notice. At Roantree's other side, Guannechota played the 12-string and sang a peculiar old ballad whose meaning and possible application YellowHorse found puzzling and obscure.

"You who are on the road
Must have a code
That you can live by
And so become yourself,
Because the past
Is just a good-bye."

"Ah, Earth," sighed Bailey, lifting her beer-mug in a personal toast. "Can hardly wait to see it."
"It won't be long now," promised Roantree. "What do you want to do when we get back to High Harbor?"

"Find my daughter alive." Bailey took a gulp of beer. "After that I don't know. With this new medicine, I might survive to go into space again."

Scott winced and looked away.

"Teach your children well,
Their parents' hell
Will slowly go by;
And feed them on your dreams--
The one thing they pick
The one you'll know by."

"Ah, there are a lot of people applying for deep space work," John YellowHorse ventured. "You might, ah, have some trouble getting accepted..." A woman of your age? Hopeless!

"Don't you ever ask them why,
If they told you, you would cry,
So just look at them and sigh
And know they love you."

"Hell, I'll sign up on whatever ship the Braider gets," Bailey grinned.

"Glad to have you," Roantree agreed. "After an adventure like this, don't you think I'll want my old crew back? All 41 of us... not bad, out of 57; all things considered."

"Don't let it bring you down, Jen," Bailey's voice held a rare note of kindness. "It was worth it, for all this."

"And you of tender years,
Can't know the fears
That your elders grew by,
So help them with your youth
They seek the truth
Before they can die..."

There was a commotion at the door, and heads turned. Hot-Trot Paula came in, wearing a bright smile and a new dress. "I got the synthesizer to make it," she said, obviously pleased. "It took days to get it right, but it was worth it. Isn't it pretty? I've wanted one ever since that time we were in Cahr-town, but I never could afford to get the satin..." The Anarchists grinned and nodded, made admiring comments and speculated about the price of cloth now that time had changed. The social-science crews blushed and gulped and looked at each other, wondering how to explain. Paula came over to the table and sat down next to Scott, whose eyes practically bulged out of their sockets.

"My, that's... lovely," gulped John YellowHorse, trying not to stare at her completely bared breasts. "Hmmm, isn't it a bit... low-cut?"

"It's supposed to be," said Paula, smiling back innocently. Her rouged nipples seemed to stare too. "It's a formal, for Midsummer Solstice Festival."

"Begod," croaked Scott. "Is that an orgy too?"

"Of course," said Paula. "Why?"

"Lord..." Scott groaned, looked at Bailey, then lookin away.

"What's the matter?" Paula was puzzled and hurt by his reaction. "Is there something wrong with that?"

"Uhm, well, most places on Earth, ah..." YellowHorse fumbled. "People don't, ah, celebrate Midsummer quite the same way." Damn you Scott! We're supposed to bring them around gently! "Uhm, and that particular style of dress is usually worn with a blouse... or something..."

"I know." Paula's smile faded out of her eyes. "Civilized people don't wear old-fashioned dresses like this. Civilized people don't dance with knives and fire. Civilized people don't worship a dozen gods or feed them sacrifices or marry triple or make love in the fields to help the corn grow. Civilized people look down on poor savages like us, and they always will, no matter what we've done!" With that, she got up and ran out of the dining room.

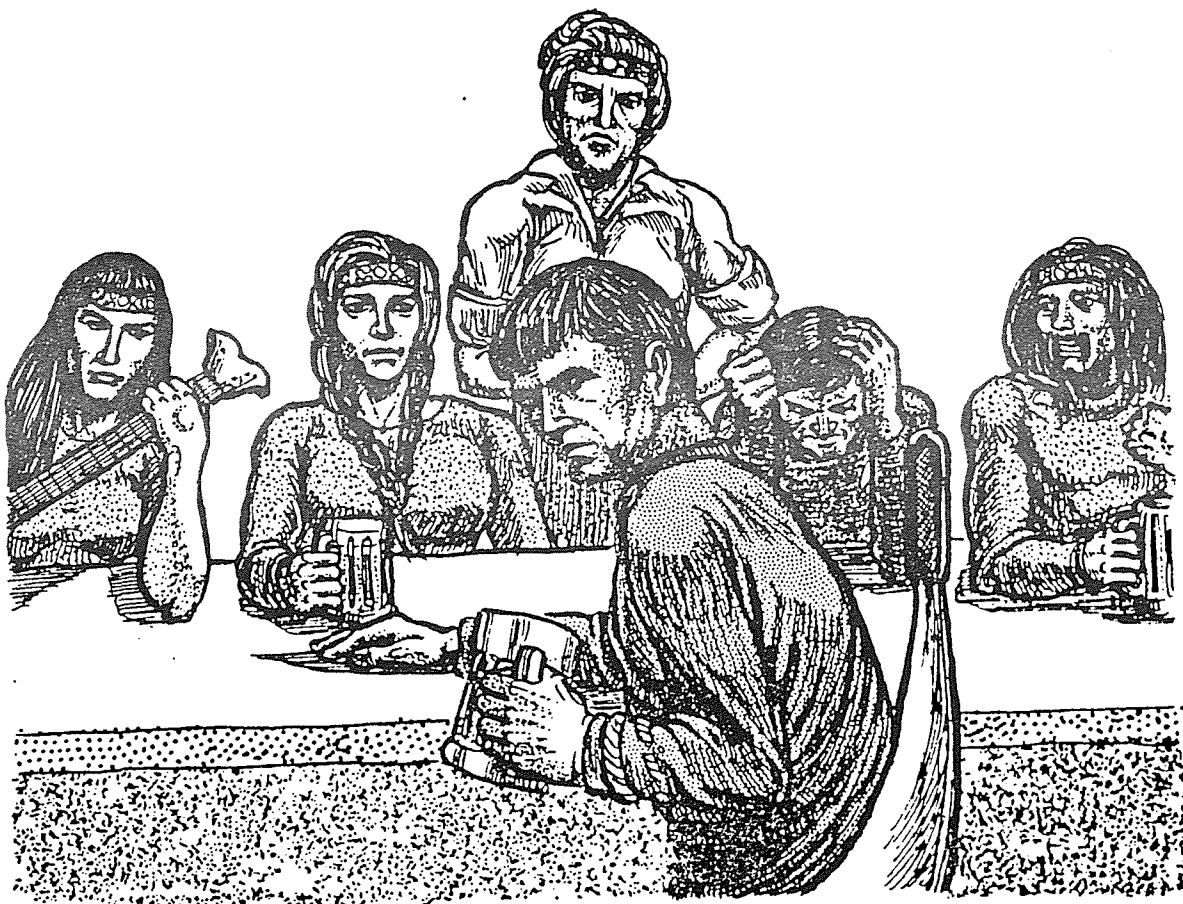
"I -- I didn't mean anything like that..." YellowHorse tried to explain.

"Oh, yes you did," growled Ann Bailey, putting down her beer-mug. "You mean all that, all you Anthropologists and all who've been talking to us. You're nearly 300 years ahead of us, and you can't help rubbing it in."

Quannechota quietly sang on, unnoticed.

"Can't you hear and don't you care?
Can't you see we must be free?
Teach our children what you believe in;
Make a world that we can believe in."

"Look, I'm sorry. Earth has changed alot in 300 years; you don't know how much..." That's the understatement of the year! There's an awful lot you have to get used to!"



"Yeah."

"Teach your parents well:
Their children's hell
Will slowly go by
And feed them on your dreams
The ones they Pick
The one you'll know by."

"What kind of people inhabit Earth now?" Jean Battre-le-Diable asked bluntly. "Are they so used to wealth and safety and comfort that they've grown weak and silly? Do pretty fashions and manners count more to them than the realities of survival? Have they totally forgotten how it is to live on the knife's edge?"

"No, of course not! There are always dangers, always frontiers -- the sky is open, and all of space is out there--"

"But those wha' believe in yon things ha' gone ta space," Scott cut in, raising weary eyes to Ann Bailey. "Ye're right. Earth belongs ta the settled an' comfortable noo, an' a' those wha' seek for something more than just ease an' quiet ha' left Earth for deep space -- as I did."

John YellowHorse almost collapsed under the table. The Anarchists stared.

"Don't you ever ask them why
If they told you you would cry
So just look at them and sigh
And know they love you."

Ann Bailey didn't stir until the last notes faded. "Hell," she growled. "So we'll go home to find our town full of snooty high-brow folk who'll be embarrassed about us. Fine homecoming we can expect from them! Ahrr..." She drowned her disgust in her beer.

"Nobody said it was perfect," said Roantree, reaching for the 12-string. "So we'll be surrounded by neighbors who sneer at us? Hell, that's better than neighbors who shout at us! So the rest of Earth is used to better Science than we have? That's better than a world full of Luddites! In any case, a world full of silly snobs is a damn sight better than an Earth overrun by Romulans. So what song do you want from me? 'Going Down the Road Feeling Bad'?"

"No..." Bailey thought a long moment, while everyone else kept quiet, flicking long measuring glances at Roantree, at John YellowHorse, and Jean Battre-le-Diable and at Scott. "I've got a better idea," she said, staring levelly at Roantree. "Sing 'The Falcon'."

Roantree raised both eyebrows. Half a dozen Anarchists, including Jean Battre-le-Diable, hastily got up and left -- nearly knocking down Christine Chapel as she came in. "Why are they leaving?" Christine asked, understanding none of this, as Roantree began the first verse.

"It's the song," explained Guannechota, not taking her eyes off Ann Bailey. "Some people... cannot hear it." And why did she do it? she wondered, noting who had left. Divesting herself of allies?

"Oh the falcon was a pretty bird. Her voice was never still.
But men with drums and men with guns, they taught her how to kill."

Roantree was wondering too, as she played the quietly solemn notes, exactly what Bailey had in mind. This was a concession of some sort -- getting rid of Jean Battre-le-Diable with his explosive temper and touchy pride was proof of that -- but the song had a dark meaning, which would also be taken as a warning. Perhaps this was meant as a warning -- or a threat.

"Her eye was on the sparrow. Her mind was on the dove.
But no one cared, or no one dared, to speak to her of love."

Scott raised his head and looked steadily at Bailey, beginning to understand her, making some good guesses at how her mind worked. He'd told something of the truth about Earth; in return, she was making her position plain, laying her cards on the table for all to read -- including him.

"Her eyes are always hooded. Her claws are sharp as steel.
We teach her not to care too much. We teach her not to feel."

John YellowHorse shivered at that verse, noting how neatly the words applied to the miserable work he and the other social-scientists had been doing. For the first time he began to wonder if the work was worth doing at all. The Anarchists weren't going to fit into Earth society, and they might not fit into Federation society at large; but if they wouldn't adjust to the Federation, couldn't it be possible -- even desirable -- for the Federation to bend, just a little, to fit them?

"She'll tease you and she'll please you. She'll satisfy your needs.
But some day she might turn around and maul the hand that feeds."

The other social-science personnel in the room glanced knowingly at each other. They'd spent days, weeks even, studying the casual violence and weird ethics of their 41 bizarre passengers, and that verse very neatly expressed the worry they'd all shared. Dealing with the Anarchists was not unlike playing handball with a live grenade.

"Your hours might be numbered. Your time might come someday.
Go break her chain, and free her brain, and send her on her way."

This song, Christine Chapel considered, was just a little too apt. The very fact that Roantree was singing it in public showed that the time of unpleasant enlightenment was drawing perilously near. Whether or not the Captain revived in time to deal with the problem, something would have to be done very soon. The song itself offered a suggestion.

"Oh the Falcon, she's a pretty bird. She warbles as she flies.
She asks us easy questions. We tell her easy lies."

Roantree looked around the dining room, noting the expressions on the assembled faces, as she fingered the last notes. For an instant the scene seemed to waver, and an odd presient feeling came. She didn't have much of The Gift, she knew, but there were moments when she got oddly accurate 'hunches', and this was one of them. Her hands almost slipped on the strings as the brief knowledge uncurled. Snow arch, overhanging its ledge... avalanche waiting to fall... The scene slipped back into focus, unchanged and solid, but Roantree still felt that ghostly sense of dread. Was it myself I was singing about? she wondered, slowing playing the last chord. Is the Falcon myself?

* * *

Somewhere in the featureless dark there was a warmth, a voice, a summoning. For a long while Kirk kept still and watched, waiting to see if it would change into something that hurt. It didn't change; the voice kept on, gentle and petient and cajoling, and the comforting warmth and steady toching promised kindness. Cautiously he moved toward it, drifting upward, out of deep water.

"...come on, Jim. You're home, you're back where you belong. You're back on the Enterprise. We're all here, everybody's alive again..." The voice was familiar, very familiar now that he thought about it, now that he was far enough from sleep to think at all. It was a voice he'd wanted very much to hear for a long, long time. "...and it's over, Jim. It's all over. You set everything right again. You did it right, and we're all back where we belong. Spock's here, and I'm here, and you can see it for yourself if you'll just open your eyes..."

Eyes? Two eyes?

NO WAIT. WHY SHOULDN'T I HAVE TWO EYES?

NO...

OH, NO!

Not this!

THIS AGAIN!

The doubling...

ECHOES! DOUBLE EXPOSURE--

Now he remembered why he'd gone plunging down into welcome darkness the last time. For a moment he almost dived back into the depths, but that well-known and well-loved voice kept calling to him, and the gentle touch reached him, and he wanted so much to see that familiar face again.

Bones, it's been so long...

SO LITTLE TIME, BUT SO MUCH HAPPENED...

To see you alive again, and remembering me this time...

BONES, HELP ME!

He opened his eyes.



At first, all his eyes could register was blue; bright, pale, Earth-sky blue. He struggled to bring it into focus, and partly succeeded. He saw double, every detail repeated, but at last he recognized the texture of a Starfleet uniform shirt. He recognized the steady, kindly voice, too. Hardly daring to breathe, he raised his eyes to the face above him. That too was doubled, edges repeating, everything seen twice, but he would have recognized those concerned blue eyes anywhere.

"...Bones?" He clutched at the blue shirt. "Bones!"

"Yes! Yes, it's me, and you're home!" McCoy hugged him shamelessly, grinning from ear to ear while tears started. "Jim... aw, Jim, welcome home."

"...so long... months and months..." NO, NO, IT'S ONLY BEEN A FEW DAYS! "...so hard to come back," Kirk whispered. The fierce sensory echoing made him dizzy. He grabbed clumsily at McCoy, wrapping both arms tight around him with all the desperation of a drowning sailor, grabbing a floating timber. It felt as if he had four arms. "Too much," he groaned, trying with no success to converge the images, to see and feel and remember and think from a single viewpoint. "I can't do it! Can't... make it stop..." He squeezed his eyes shut and buried his face against McCoy's shoulder, drew up his knees, and curled into a tight knot. One thing at a time. ONE SENSE AT A TIME... Just feel. Don't even listen to the words... DON'T OPEN YOUR EYES. Not yet... wait... get used to it... NO USE! STILL TWO OF US! Give it time... NO, NO MORE OF TIME! TOO MANY GAMES WITH TIME! Tell him! Explain! "Bones, I'm doubled! Two of me, in one skin... and I can't stand it!"

"No, no, of course not," McCoy gasped under the pressure of those frantically-clutching arms. "It's all right. Just hold on. Lie still and hold on." Damned inanities! But I can't think of anything else...

"Don't die again... don't forget me..."

"No, no. I won't leave you."

That seemed to be the right thing to say; Kirk gave a long, weary sigh and relaxed his desperate grip, lay still and said nothing further. McCoy could tell from his rate of breathing that Kirk wasn't asleep. Now what? he wondered, his hands circling gently on Kirk's back and shoulder. Made progress, all right, but it seems to have stopped here. He glanced at the indicators, making sure that Kirk was indeed awake. Keep it up, keep him from slipping back... maintenance dosage of Tender-Loving-Care... I can think of worse ways to spend a whole working day. "I'll stay here as long as you want me to," he murmured, settling his head on the pillow. "Stay with you, won't leave you to face that alone..." Actually, I've got to get up sooner or later. How do I handle that? ...get someone to take my place, but who?

He was still pondering that question an hour later, when Nurse Chapel cautiously tiptoed in to check on both of them. She took in the scene on the couch, said nothing whatsoever, but gave McCoy a very questioning look.

"Don't just stand there," McCoy whispered, "get someone to replace me! I've got to get up sometime."

Christine nodded quick understanding, held up a wait-a-moment finger, turned and hurried out.

"Hey, do you have someone particular in mind?" McCoy asked, still not daring to raise his voice. Christine didn't hear. The doors shut behind her, leaving McCoy cursing silently and wondering what the hell she was going to do. He didn't have long to wait: less than five minutes later the door shooshed open again to admit Spock. The Vulcan padded up to the couch, silently studied the two figures on it, and raised an expressive eyebrow at McCoy.

"She sent you? Hmm, not a bad idea, at that." McCoy gently tried to disengage himself from Kirk's grip, but Kirk groaned and clutched him harder. McCoy gave up the attempt, patted Kirk reassuringly, and gave Spock an eloquent shrug.

The Vulcan sat down carefully on the other side of the couch and leaned close to McCoy. "Nurse Chapel did not fully explain the situation," he said quietly. "Precisely how may I be of help?"

"Hold him, talk to him, get through to him somehow... The mind-touch! Spock, can you...?"

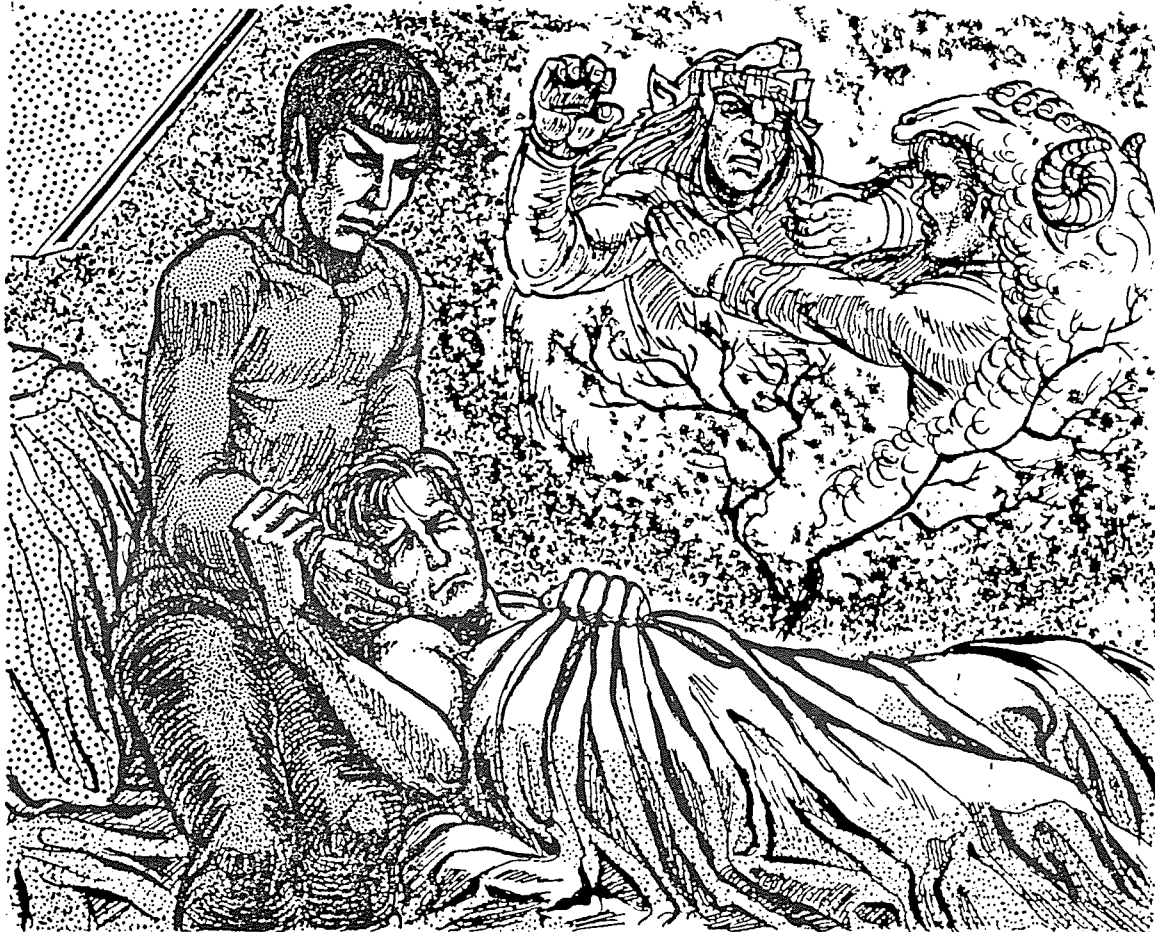
"Yes." Spock's hands settled on Kirk's face, fingers positioning carefully over the nerve-centers. He reached,

probed, connected -- and suddenly gasped and quivered. Kirk sobbed once, turning slightly toward that familiar touch, and let go of McCoy's shirt.

McCoy took the opportunity to slide out of Kirk's limp arms, sat up, and rubbed one foot that had gone to sleep. "Spock, what is it?" he asked. "What's happening?"

"I... have him..." Spock whispered. "...both... must... join..." His eyes closed, forehead furrowed in concentration. The indicators above him leaped and dived in a wild, aimless pattern. "...Jim..." Jim... I am with you... do not pull away... hold fast... keep contact...

Spock! YES... You're alive! I must be... DON'T GO AWAY... I missed you so... all those long terrible months... NO, NO! IT'S BEEN ONLY A FEW DAYS... DAYS AND DAYS LIKE THIS... CAN'T STAND IT! ...I set Time right, but a few loose ends... unresolved... like myself!



There is complete separation? Two distinct memories, personalities, body-images, awarenesses?

Yes! YES! IT HURTS! An image appeared, a symbol they could both agree on: a tree with two trunks, each turing a different way, and only the roots -- hidden, underground, below consciousness -- were joined, unified, a single system. Like an oak split by lightning... CAN'T FUSE WITH THAT... AND CAN'T GET AWAY FROM HIM! OH, SPOCK, IT'S HORRIBLE!

I know what it is like to be divided in oneslef...

Can you help me? I'VE GOT TO GET OUT OF THIS!

Perhaps. Spock probed delicately through the sundered darkness, testing for tone/color/ direction until he was certain

of the dimensions of the problem. Yes, the possibility was there. Difficult, but it can be done. The necessary first step is to overcome the emotional reaction which is blocking your reintegration.

...What -- REACTION?

Your destructive, wasteful, intolerant hatred of each other.

There was a moment's shocked silence; then they argued, vying for Spock's verdict.

All right, I admit I hate him -- and why shouldn't I? His stupidity lost the universe, cost me everything, caused me more pain than I knew existed...

BUT I DIDN'T DO IT!

Only because I stopped you, this time. Even so, you killed Sparks!

I DIDN'T KNOW! I THOUGHT HE WAS--

You fool, you didn't think! You would have -- you'd already started. You let Pennington go!

BUT I SAW NO HARM IN LETTING HER GO OFF ON HER OWN. HOW WAS I TO KNOW?

Guess! Play hunches! You, who were so good at that... You knew the dangers of time-travel; you knew nothing about Pennington -- her skills, her background, how her mind worked -- and you'd been warned about People for Temporal Control. But you let an unknown like her go running off alone. Idiot! I bet you would have had better sense if Pennington had been a man, instead of a pretty woman...

WAIT A MINUTE...

Fool! Thinking with your crotch instead of your head -- jenneth Roantree wouldn't have made a mistake like that! She's a better Captain than you are!

SHUT UP!

Spock, I can't live with a fool like this! To think that people's lives should depend on such fools! It's wrong -- it's all wrong!

Captain, you judge too harshly. All beings are capable of error.

But an error like this? Too Much!

I DIDN'T KNOW, YOU INTOLERANT BASTARD! I HAD NO REASON TO MISTRUST HER! WHAT DO YOU WANT ME TO BE, PARANOID?

Less of a fool!

A RAVING LUNATIC, LIKE YOU? I CAN'T BE THAT. SPOCK, CAN'T YOU SEE HOW DIFFERENT HE IS? WHATEVER HE'S BEEN THROUGH, WHATEVER'S HE SUFFERED, IT'S WARPED HIS MIND!

Older... sadder... and wiser...

THOSE PEOPLE -- THE ANARCHISTS -- THEY'VE DONE SOMETHING TO HIM, BRAINWASHED HIM, GOD KNOWS WHAT, AND HE'S BECOME ONE OF THEM! HE CAN'T BE TRUSTED!

You are reacting out of fear, not logic. There is no reason to distrust the knowledge gained from this experience, these memories...

Memories? I can't begin to resolve the different memories! Much less...

...CAN'T STAND THIS...

That last time, when the transporter split me...

DON'T THINK OF THAT!

--the dark memories brief and vague, I could discount them as dreams, but this...

NO! NO! DREAMS, NIGHTMARES, ALL THE WAY OUT HERE, HIS MEMORIES TORTURING MY SLEEP!!! DEAR GOD, I DON'T WANT THEM BY DAYLIGHT!

You have to! You can't lose me!

WOLF! TATTERED, ONE-EYED WOLF!

Better than a stupid sheep!

They beat and clawed at each other with ghostly fingers.

Enough, Spock intervened. Listen, whatever your conflicts, you must accept each other. You must complete the fusion which the Guardian began. Differing memories and ethical conflicts aside, you must become one person, one unified personality. Do you consent to this?

There was a long silence. Spock could feel the two linked minds looking at each other, judging, considering, reluctantly agreeing. Yes. I -- WE CAN'T GO ON LIKE THIS. Yes. Anything's better than this. Underneath that lay another agreement -- each of them silently promising that if one personality had to yield, go under, it would be the other one and not him.

Spock sighed to himself. Blending them equally would be difficult, to say the least. If they fought for control of their shared body, they might very easily destroy each other. There were no reliable techniques for psychic work of this sort. Split personalities were rare enough, and a division this severe had never, to the best of his knowledge, been encountered before. We must begin from the points of agreement... A vision lashing them tight so that normal growth would fuse them. You are James T. Kirk, Captain of the Enterprise. Remember that.

Yes... YES... Clear memory of how it was/looked/sounded/felt to be up there at the con, on the bridge, watching the main screen, sensing the activity of the ship all around him: no doubling, no dissonance, no split view of thought or feeling. On this there was perfect agreement, sureness, self-certainty -- and he yearned for it with all the strength of his considerable will. YES!

...Unity. Good. Slowly, carefully, maintaining that image, Spock began pulling Kirk up toward full consciousness. Captain of the Enterprise. Remember...

...back where I belong, Kirk thought warmly, drawing close to the surface of waking. Captain... decisions... what will I do about...

You are the Captain. You are needed. Remember your work, Spock insisted. Concentrate on that... unity of self-image...

...my work, my ship... my decision... He could feel, distinctly and without doubling, the light pressure of Spock's hands against his face, the warm sheet under his back, the blanket over him. He could almost see the bridge, almost remember the nagging worry. ...decide... what will I do about the...

Jim, not yet! Spock tried to forestall the growing thought, grabbed at it, and missed.

What will I do about the Anarchists? Kirk's eyes snapped open. What will I do about Jenneth? He looked down at his hands. They were still doubled. Superimposed over them was a warning vision of a sun-burst tatoo and a half-moon scar. "NO!" he screamed, slamming his eyes shut and struggling in Spock's grip. TOO MUCH! OVERLOAD! CAN'T... whichever way I turn, only sore betrayal and pain -- WAKE UP, ONLY TO SUFFER AND DESTROY AGAIN? NO! I've used up everything, just getting this far... Image of a cup drained fry, and no water or wine or blood anywhere to refill it. EVERYTHING HAS ITS LIMITS, INCLUDING ME! Spock, can't you see that my strength is gone?

Jim, don't lose what you've gained! Spock grabbed at that frantic, pain-lashed double consciousness and held on for dear life and more. Don't sink back... not into the dark again. If you can't go forward, at least stay here.

...will you stay with me?

Yes.

The internal struggling stopped. Spock caught a startling image of a wounded beast laying its head in his lap. He felt the pressure of the silent double consciousness resting against him, held up by his telepathic grip, trusting him not to let go -- and at this point it was unified. Fragile, but one. He didn't dare move.

"Spock?" McCoy gingerly touched the Vulcan's shoulder. "Spock, what's happening? Why did he yell like that? What are you doing?"

Spock dragged his eyes open. They were bloodshot. "Doctor," he whispered tightly, "Do not... distract me. I am... holding his mind together."

"Is he asleep. Can you leave him?"

"No."

"Can you pull him out of this?"

"No... just maintain."

"How long will he have to stay like this?"

"Don't know."

"God... hold on. I'll think of something." McCoy slithered off the couch, took a last horrified look at the chaotic indicators, and ran on tiptoe out into the corridor.

* * *

"How long've you been waiting?"

"One hour and forty-seven minutes since lunch."

"Hmmm..." Roanree stretched small cramps out of her legs and pushed the reading console aside. "I don't know, maybe it's that strange scene at lunch, or maybe Jim's having nightmares, but I feel rotten. Never thought I'd see the day when the library computer'd become boring, but I just can't seem to get involved in it. Besides, every other damn subject I ask about is locked up under Spock's voice print. Damn if I know why?"

"He strikes me as needlessly... officious," Quannechota muttered. He is also powerfully gifted... and obtrusive with it. I do not like him.

"Maybe he thinks we'll burn our little fingers, getting into things -- like five-year-olds with a chemistry set." Roanree tapped her fingers on the chair and looked around for a clock. "Is that one of the things you meant, that they're

patronizing us?"

"That among others. I have kept the Social-Scientists from bothering you unduly, but others of our crew have not been so fortunate at evading their pestering. There have been complaints."

"You mean, not just from Paula? I thought she was overreacting a little..."

"You noticed the way they behaved at lunch."

"Yes, I thought they were clumsily ill-mannered... But that's the only case of it I've seen. Besides, they can't be blamed for being over-eager at questioning us. We come from another time-line, another whole history, after all. There's so much they must want to know."

They also presume to give unasked advice."

"Well, there's so much we have to learn. They're trying to help."

"Nonetheless, their behavior at lunch was not an isolated case. It is common for their questions to be impertinent, and their reactions to the answers often verge upon the insulting."

"They're from a different culture. A lot of them aren't from Earth, and the ones that are... well, Mr. Scott explained about that. It's pure cultural difference. There are bound to be little misunderstandings. There were plenty before, remember?"

"Yes, and we excused them as the result of undue strain. Home in their time line again, these people have no such excuse. Even granted that many of them are from Earth, and would be culturally inclined to look down on us, remember that Citizen Scott told us it was the more adventurous, the less hidebound, who went to space. Thses are the least provincial, the most open-minded of Earth -- yet they still treat us with a smug sense of superiority."

"It must be pretty noticeable to get that kind of rise from you."

"Let me give you an example. Ann Bailey, discussing our space program, mentioned that work shut down in winter due to the food problem; asked for details, she explained that when food ran short in late winter, all abled-bodied adults were needed for hunting and guarding food-supplies from raids by our neighbors. The questioners appeared shocked, and asked why we could not negotiate peace with our neighbors. They could not seem to understand that there was no way to negotiate a shortage of food."

"Hell, how could they know? They've never gone hungry."

"Further, when Bailey explained our situation in detail, the questioners, quote: 'All moved away from me, as if I had fleas', endquote. They then hastened to name two or three worlds where such situations also occur -- all of which, as was later revealed, are barbarous worlds below the level of industrialization. Bailey was distinctly annoyed by this."

"An Bailey can be annoyed by the sun, moon, stars and aurora borealis. Proves nothing."

"On the contrary, she has been most enthusiastic about this new time-line, its people and its Science, ever since Dr. McCoy cured her rheumatism. For her to be annoyed by these scientists, they must have behaved very contemptuously."

"Is that why -- At lunch, when she asked me to sing 'The Falcon' --"

"That was a concession, Jenneth, and a warning. She is willing to abide an Earth filled with arrogant provincials, just as she had to put up with an Earth full of Luddites all her life. However, she is certainly not willing to put up with such arrogant-provincial treatment from sophisticated space travelers, who should know better."

Roantree looked up at the ceiling, frowning. "All these worlds and people... all different. Bound to be mistakes, misconceptions..."

"Another example: three of the women among the social-scientists gave unsolicited gifts to several women of our crew, and refused to take any offering in exchange."

"Hell, that's just a minor mistake. Nothing to get upset about."

"There is more. The gifts were spray-bottles of scent and assorted body-paints, and the donors made it clear that they were eager to see how our people used them."

"Heh! As if we were rich Wheatland merchants! Still, it sounds harmless. What happened?"

"Our people handed the gifts around, and used them as one would expect: drawing war-paint designs and religious symbols on their skins, spraying themselves and each other with the scent-bottles, occasionally indulging in spray fights in the corridors... Eh, don't laugh. The Social-Scientists in question walked into one such bottle-fight, and were astonsihingly upset."

"Upset? About some harmless playing?"

"It appeared that our people had violated some bizarre sexual taboo. The scientists hinted strongly that only females in their culture use scent and body paint, and then only in ritualized fashion. The usage seemed distinctly designed for courtship purposes, yet these women wear it most of the time."

"Huh? They're courting most of the time? Impossible. Must be a mistake."

"This occasioned a long discussion about courtship and marriage customs, in which the Social-Scientists -- all of them female, as I mentioned -- revealed some disturbing sexual customs which appear to be very widespread in this culture."

"Disturbing...? You mean not just that business of whether they marry in pairs or triples?"

"Indeed. From what I could deduce, there is a sharp social division between the sexes. Females are raised, fed trained and occupied differently from males: their function is mainly... decorative."

"What?! They're all like those worthless Wheatland women? Lord of Light, how did that happen? What's gone wrong with Earth?"

"Jenneth, I did not mention this to anyone, but... What if it is not just Earth?"

"Huh?"

As nearly as I can deduce from the library computer, on approximately 61% of the Alliance worlds where the intelligent inhabitants are of two sexes -- and this includes Earth -- the males are socially and economically dominant. The females are restricted, decorated, and treated as automatic weaklings -- much as it was on Earth before the Collapse. On 28% of the two-sexed worlds, the situation is exactly reversed; the females are dominant, the males decoarted and restricted. On only 11% of all two-sexed worlds is there actual equality, and 91% of these are described as 'primitive'."

"'Primitive'..." Roantree echoed. She snapped to her feet and took three fast steps forward, then stopped, hands clenching. "So that's it. These fat, healthy, comfortable people... they've lket this old evil flourish, dallying with inequality... maybe not even realizing how dangerous it is, maybe playing with it all in innocence because they're so long away from the ancient tyrannies that they don't recognize it for what it is... And- and the only people who don't toy with this daanable custom are the ones who can't afford to -- the 'primitives'! Primitives like us! Great Gods!" She came back to her chair and fell into it. "...So of course that's just one more reason to think of us as backward, savages, poor relations! Damn! Merdes-pour-cevelles! Patronizing... No wonder. Oh, Mother of Mares!"

Quannechota tensed at that oath; it wasn't something Roantree used lightly. She hadn't expected the Braider to react this much. "Jim did tell us that this universe was not perfect."

"Yes, yes he did," Roantree sighed, rubbing her jaw. "Does everyone else understand that? It's a hard thing, after struggling so long, to find out that the prize is flawed... two flaws... big ones..."

"Wha--? Jenneth!" McCoy skidded to a halt across their line of vision. "Oh, am I glad to see you! Jenneth, you've got to help us. It's Jim. He's -- he's fighting a civil war in his mind, and Spock is trying to hold him together, but he can't keep it up much longer. You're the only other person on this ship who has a mental link with Jim. If you can reach him, you and Spock might be able to pull him out of this. Please, Jen, will you come help?"

Roantree blinked rapidly, digesting all that, and turned a bemused look at Quannechota. "As you were saying," she grinned, "It isn't exactly perfect."

"Huh?" asked McCoy.

"Never mind. Come on Quanna. Let's go look at him."

* * *

"...Oh once I was free to go sailing in the wind of the Springtime mind,
And once the clouds I sailed upon were sweet as lilac wine
Then why have the breezes of Summertime been laced with a grim design?"

...No, don't sing that...

Vision of wind over a barren plain, wailing loneliness.

No, Jim, you are not alone.

...Spock?

I am here.

...don't leave me...

I won't.

The wounded beast laid its head back in his lap and shut its golden eyes. Spock soothed it for a few moments more, then went back to the slow, stealthy task of binding up the two disparate memories, attitudes, purposes. He had managed to accomplish much -- the memories were approximately reconciled, sundered personalities half-merged -- but two insurmountable barriers still remained. Personal and professional loyalties are at odds over Jenneth and her people. Body-image, sense of physical self -- still doubled. These memories are too strong, too divergent, for me to blend... I can only maintain, hope for change. The prolonged deep mental contact was exhausting; Spock estimated that he could continue for only another half hour at most. He refused to think of what would happen after that.

Two vague shadows fell across his vision; one corner of his mind recognized them as Jenneth Roantree and Quannechota Two-Feathers. He couldn't afford to spare attention on them. Without thought, he duly noted the two conferring in whispers, then Roantree growing still, silent, abstracted. For a handful of seconds there was another presence in the close darkness with him, a strangely familiar/unfamiliar mind observing, probing delicately, brushing feather-light against his own straining mental contact. Do not interfere, he warned it. Don't make him aware of you.

Won't... the other promised. Just looking, checking... There was an impression of aching sympathy, a brief instant's sense of a gentle hand stroking the wounded beast's head, and then a silent withdrawal. Kirk never noticed. A last thought flickered, aimed entirely at Spock: Too cold, your love... can't reach enough. Spock refused to notice. At the far rim of his perception the two shadows conferred in whispers, then went away. He was left alone with Jim.

* * *

"What did you learn?" McCoy asked. "What can be done for him?"

Roantree thought awhile before she answered. "The sundered senses are the worst of it, especially feeling. If we could unite that, he might be able to do the rest himself. Trouble is, Spock doesn't have any idea... What's the matter with him, anyway? Why doesn't he feel anything?"

"He's a Vulcan. All Vulcans are like that. Haven't ypu read the tapes?"

"Yes, but I didn't realize just how... I'm sorry, Doctor, but the only word I can think of is 'repressed'. And they do that to themselves? Lord of Light, they're worse than the Old-Time Churchers of Saginaw." She raised her head and gave McCoy an unfathomable look. "You know, you civilized people don't touch each other enough. It's as if you thought there was something dangerous about your own sense of touch. You lose an awful lot that way. Still, these Vulcans seem even worse. There are places he won't go, things he won't think of, for all he cares about Jim. That's why he can't finish the job."

"So what do you recommend?"

"Earth magic," said Quannechota, "The Rite of Saturn. It has had reliable effect in many similiar cases, and I have done it before."

Roantree looked away.

"Uhhmm, just what does it consist of?" McCoy asked.

"It would be difficult to describe to you." Quannechota spread her hands. "It begins with the 'Lomi and the Elemental Chant, and ends in mating, if successful. It aligns all the senses to one aim."

McCoy bit back a wild laugh, and thought hard. Why not? Their tricks have helped so far... and this damn-well could work. He loves her... and Human sexuality can be amazingly strong... good antidote for pain, anyway... "Go ahead and try it," he said. "God knows, it can't hurt."

"Very well. I shall go fetch proper equipment." Quannechota got up and padded away.

"...Equipment?" McCoy asked of the empty air.

"Incense, firecup, source of music, pine-branch," Roantree recited. "We saved a branch from the Yul-tree, so she can use that. Also oil and water."

"Uhuh..." Ando to think Spock sometimes calls me a bead-shaking witch doctor! "Well, if it works, it works. Who am I to argue?"

"You're the Doctor who's going to restore my fertility, remember? That's what I came to see you about in the first place. Can it be done today?"

"Oh, that's right. Sure. No problem. We can probably do it while Quanna's busy with Jim. I'll go get the second operating room set up..." He hurried off, grateful to have something concrete and effective to do.

Roantree barely glanced up as Quannechota came back with her arms full and went on into the intensive care-unit. I'll give what help I can, she promised silently, Even if it's no more than background... Her eyes closed. Unnoticed, her hands moved as if shaping themselves to the neck and boy of her 12-string.

* * *

Time passed: timeless impasse. Spock was vaguely aware of the door opening and shutting again, someone in the room, a recording of muffled drums playing softly, a brief flare of flame and a hint of herb-and-flower-scented smoke. Then there was a sound of someone approaching the couch. He shook his head -- all he could risk -- to warn the other away.

To his horror, he felt another presence quietly invading his mind: a soft pressure, an almost-repulsive closeness, a calm and closed-wrapped darkness, like a cloaked sensor-probe. He recognised it, and he hated it. Quannechota, go away! Do not distract me!

There was a sense of surprise, annoyance, distaste, and then a withdrawing to as much distance as possible. Quannechota did not care for this contact either. "Can you leave him?" she asked aloud.

"No. I am... holding his sanity... in my hands."

"I see." Quannechota gnawed her lip for a moment, then straightened her shoulders and steeled herself for an unpleasant task. What is the word? Sauvez-vous... no, gardez... "Guard yourself, then."

She moved to one side of the couch and undressed. Spock noticed just enough to be silently surprised. She began humming a repetitive, minor-keyed, wordless chant as she bent over Kirk and pulled away the blankets. Her hands descended slowly, lightly, almost imperceptibly, sliding smooth and light and gentle over Kirk's motionless face, throat, shoulders, arms, and on down his unmoving body. The soft chant took on words, half-spoken, half thought.

"Manitou. manitou. Gitche' Manitou. Great Spirit.
All-life, All-living, All-source, I call thee.
All-Father, Great Mother, hear the call of your children.
All life, send life. Bring the flow of bright waters.
Water of life, river of light, flow through my hands.
Flow as bright water to dry Earth waiting,
To dry flesh, thirsting to parched spirit yearning.
Flow to the spirit and body of this one
He that my hands touch and my heart honors.
Flow into this one, and fill him with life."

...who calls? ...touches?... Kirk sighed and stirred feebly, lulled by hypnoticrhythym and the steady, comforting flow of hands. ...doesn't hurt... feels good... Spock...? You?

No. It is Quannechota. Entangled in Kirk's mind and nerves, Spock squirmed inwardly at the unwanted contact. The subtly powerful intimacy was a disturbing as the telepathic pressures from Quannechota's intense, absorbing mind. He could not afford to shift attention, let go of Kirk, provide the concentration necessary to block the contact -- and he wasn't sure he should interfere. Kirk's responses were unified, mind and body accepting them with no division, no doubling; anything that could encourage such unity was of value. No choice... Spock unconsciously gritted his teeth as he set his mind to the unpleasant but necessary task of cooperation. Carefully, gently, he urged Kirk back toward conciousness, holding his mind open, relaxed, bare to the seductive touching and the soothing chant. Kirk showed no resistance; if anything, he reached toward the sensations, recognizing their origins.

Quanna... Miramane... my wife... I remember... Nowhere in his mind was there any negative feeling toward Quannechota, nor any of the intrusive telepathy Spock felt. He remembered her well, very well, off intriguing tapes that had made him dream and wonder, out of memories that were sweet bright places in a nine-month ordeal. Part of him was curious, hopeful, intrigued and fascinated; the other part yearned toward her like a moth to its fated flame. Oh love... he reached for her, One thing found in a universe of losses... yes... touch me...

Unity of purpose. useful, Spock grudgingly admitted. I shall endure it... In one corner of his mind he wondered just how much he would be called on to endure. Already the relayed stimuli were disturbing, like a vague light tickling, or a faint itch that he couldn't reach to scratch. I can endure it. I am a Vulcan.

Quannechota sang on, her touch growing heavier and deeper, massaging muscles that hadn't moved in long days, breathing the self-made armor of immobility, probing deeply to leave no nerve untouched and unawakened.

"Awake, Son of Earth, for the winter has gone.
Awake with the waters, with the fires of Spring.

Awake with the warm wind lifting the branches.
Awake, for the sun stands high in the heavens--
--And yes, we are home in the light of the Sun!--
The new sprouts are misting the Earth with green,
The trees' velvet buds unfold to flowers..."

...apple blossoms... Kirk's surfacing mind formed a startlingly vivid image; lilacs, late snowdrops, crocuses in blue and gold and white, all the riotous color and growth and change of spring on Earth, complete with the smell of pollen-streaked warm winds. Sounds of returning birds and flowing water, and all the age-old symbolish of rebirth. Spock was caught up in it, awed and shaken, entangled in the bright images, in elements and implications of human experience that his mother had never warned him about.

"By the power of water, I summon your spirit.
By the element of water, I call you to life.
In the name of the elements of water, I call."

And there was water, scattered in cool droplets on startjed skin, smoothed and spread by knowing hands. Kirk stretched and sighed, sensitive now to every current of air that touched him. The warm probing hands left him feeling melted and boneless inside, fluid within and without, like a wind-ruffled rain-pond ready to flow into the nearest stream. ...don't let me drain away... scoop me up in a bucket. Give me some limits!

Here you are. Here... Spock tried to tell him, and then realized to his dismay that he wasn't very sure of where his own body was. He was caught up on Kirk's visions of running streams and sky-mirroring lakes and green corn sprouting in a fresh-watered field. The only definition of space that came to him was the sliding touch of Guannechota's hands and the steady sound of her voice.

"By the power of air, I summon your spirit.
From the wind's four quarters, I gather your spirit.
In the name of the elements of air, I call."

Feel the air... Little breezes, soft breaths darted over him as Guannechota bent her head to sing the soft-medicine-chant words, her lips less than an inch away. Kirk remembered wind over long grass, salt breezes rolling off a calm sea, welcome cool winds in hot summers. He shivered, delighted as the caress of moving air. Why have the winds of summer been laced with... Time-winds. Winds of change... I have to deal with that.

Jim, no! Spock tried once more to forestall him, but couldn't get through. Snagged beyond hope in the growing web of feeling, he could no longer concentrate enough to send a clear message. He lost track of his body, vaguely felt himself slipping sideways, sprawling across the top of the bed, and he struggled for enough control to keep his hands on Kirk's head, the telepathic contact unbroken.

But what can I do with Time's wind? Kirk asked whoever could hear him. A poor space sailor like me... what could I do but spread my sails and take the best wind I could find? Jenneth, could you do any better?

Flickering through the gray winds came an image of Roantree's face, and her voice singing. This time the song was different.

"Marooned in babylon,
Thrill-seekers on the run,
We're hiding from the sun tonight.
My madness is set free.
I dream of sorcery.
Bring all your sins to me tonight..."

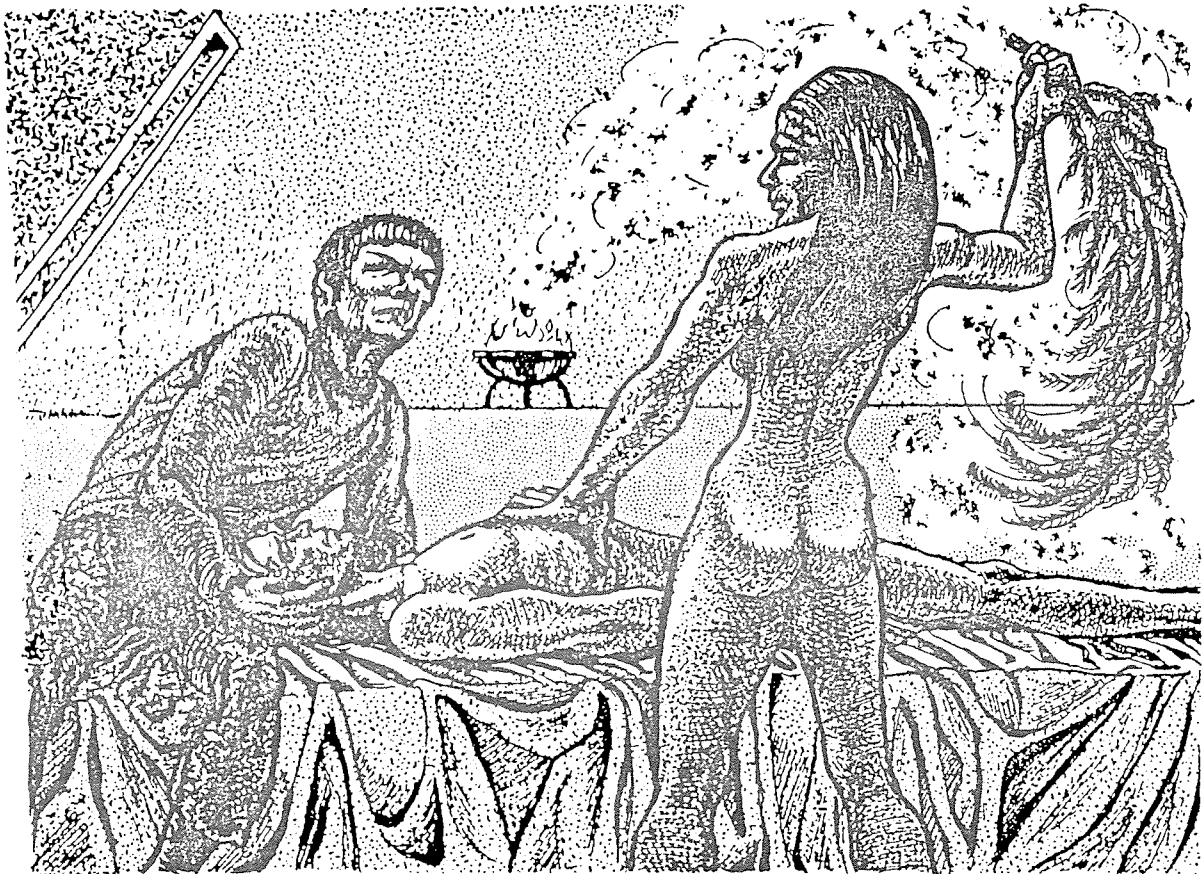
...No, he decided. I couldn't have done other than I did... No choice.

"And nothing here is certain,
And nothing is the truth.
A peep behind the curtain
Will rob you of your youth."

...but I did the right thing... no matter what the cost, past or future... no matter what I had to pay for it...

"By the power of fire I summon your spirit,
By the element of fire, I waken you to life.
In the name of the element of fire, I call."

There came a sudden, sharp, bittersweet stinging, a whistling of air and a feathery-fierce impact, light and quick and only half painful, mixed with the smell of pine. Kirk gasped and opened his eyes. In the dim light he saw Quannechota, naked as a flame, arms raised, holding a dark-green-needed branch. She brought it down hard across him, the soft needles striking and bending, leaving a fine mist of pale gold resin where they touched. There was no mistake; the blows were hard and serious. She's beating the hell out of me! he realized, shocked. Beating the... past out of me? Do it! I've earned it! It doesn't even hurt that much... like fierce kisses... give me another...



"Give me the kiss of light.
Give me the kiss of --
Lightning flashing, thunder crashing,
Love is with me still.
Rearrange my holidays
And move in for the kill."

No! Spock stabbed blindly at Guannechota. Stop this! Stop!

Be still! She snapped back at him. It is necessary. Symbol needed, but symbol only. It doesn't take much to make Jim Kirk stop hating himself.

The resin began to take effect. Kirk felt it as a growing heat, a soft tickling/stinging that didn't fade but grew with every stroke, filling him with a bright-hot itching that followed the flailing of the branch, through his arms and chest and belly and down by steady degrees all the way to his feet. It tickled and itched and teased to distraction, and he twisted and rolled under the sweet-maddening force of it, not so much wanting it to stop as wanting something more, something to complete it.

Somewhere in the bright-shot dark, Spock groaned and squirmed helplessly.

"By the power of the Earth, I summon your spirit.
By the source of life, I draw you to life.
In the name of the element of Earth, I call."

Then the branch was gone and there was only the fierce brightness and Guannechota, her hands skimming light and fierce and sweet, and her warm mouth striking like summer lightening, and the whole length of her lean supple body sliding against him. Every nerve in him flared and burned. "Yes!" he shouted hoarsely, reaching for her. Good god, yes! His arms closed on her solid smooth back, and her cool black hair fell around him like a spring twilight, and her searching mouth sealed to his, and her long legs wrapped around his hips like clasping serpents. Yes! Yes! Yes! he shouted inside his skull. Oh Quanna. I'd forgotten -- How could I forget? My beautiful... Her smooth sweet flesh rippled tight against him, and he thought he could drown in the joy of it.

No... whispered a voice somewhere near. SAVAGE! hissed mixed voices from the past and future, ANIMAL! WOLF! YOU DON'T DESERVE TO LIVE, LET ALONE---

Like hell! he threw back at them all, clutching Quanna tight in his arms. I'm sick of being conscience-stricken. Do what you like to me tomorrow -- burn me at the stake tomorrow -- but I'll burn in this sweet star-center now!

Do it Jim! Roantree's voice cheered from some invisible sideline. Go storm heaven!

He needed no more urging. Laughing, he plunged headlong into the sweet bright storm of feeling, gone like a racehorse from the gate, like a photon-torpedo streaking toward its target. Quanna surged like the sea in his arms, arching up, then down in hot waves around him, and the sweet/fierce tickling/teasing/burning lifted him up to her, reaching upward into wordless delight as bright as a sun's core, hot and tender and tight and pulsing in waves that filled his senses to overload and beyond. Waves... ninth wave... sweep me away... coming soon... lifting... cresting... Now! "Quanna!" he cried above the surf-pounding blood-roar in his ears. "Quanna... Oh... love you! I love you!"

---just one "I" --- Spock noted in passing, as he was dragged writhing and helpless into the heart of the sensory nova. He thought he screamed, but there was no way to tell whose voice it was, and then the explosion shattered his consciousness to atoms and scattered them as wide as the range of the stars.

* * *

"Jenneth?" The voice seemed to come from close at hand. "Are you all right?"

Roantree pulled her eyes open and head up, and dully noted that the concerned face bending over her belonged to Dr. McCoy. "'M tired," she said. "You won't need much to knock me out... You ready to operate yet?"

"The question is, are you ready?" Having second thoughts? Some women might react that way... "Are you certain you want to go through with this?"

"And have kids again? Damn right I do." Roantree pulled herself to her feet. "Where do I put my clothes and things?"

"You wait right here. I'll send the stretcher, and we'll take care of the rest." He went off to get the stretcher team and set up the prep-room.

Roan tree got up and paced across the room and back, nervous and itchy now that the crises was over and the miracle about to happen. A glimpse of red in the doorway caught her eye, and she turned to look.

It was Uhura.

* * *

"...love you, Quanna..." Kirk whispered again, drifting quietly down toward twilight. Quannechota smiled and tracked drowsy kisses across his face. He ran sleep-heavy fingers through her hair and noticed that he could see and feel every strand distinctly, without doubling. He had, after all, only one right hand and only one pair of eyes. ...One... one body... one me... the knowledge rippled through the vast ocean of peace inside him, one last gift that made the happiness complete. ...oh love... He twined his fingers in a lock of her hair and kissed her from the cheek to chin, and finally fell asleep with his head pillowed on her breast.

Medical Log, Stardate 5909.7, McCoy Recording:

SUCCESSFULLY OPERATED ON JENNETH ROANTREE FOR REMOVAL OF UTERINE SCAR-TISSUE. THERE'S NO REASON WHY SHE CAN'T BECOME A MOTHER AGAIN -- BUT I ADVISED HER TO WAIT A FEW DAYS BEFORE TRYING. SHE SEEMS UTTERLY HAPPY WITH THE NEWS. NO PROBLEM THERE.

NO NEWS WHATEVER FROM THE INTENSIVE CARE UNIT. I THINK I'VE GIVEN QUANNECHOTA ENOUGH TIME TO FINISH HER... TREATMENT. BUT I'LL WAIT ANOTHER HALF HOUR BEFORE I GO AND CHECK PERSONALLY.

The doors opened on dim light and quiet. McCoy moved cautiously into the darkened room, not knowing what to expect and trying to be prepared for anything. Nonetheless, he was startled to find the lights turned off completely and the only illumination coming from a small wood-fire in a brazier, now burned down to coals. The air smelled of pine-smoke and flower resin and sweet -- Human and Vulcan. He tiptoed up to the burdened couch and took a long, thoughtful look, lips shaping into a soundless whistle.

Kirk and Quannechota lay asleep in each other's arms, Kirk relaxed and smiling, Quanna looked happily exhausted and triumphant. Spock was sprawled unconscious across the top of the couch, one hand still brushing Kirk's hair.

So you rode through it with them! McCoy bent over the unconscious Vulcan. Couldn't you let go? ...suppose not. Un-
willing witness? Poor devil, you must have been... almost drowned!

He carefully tugged Spock off the couch and half-carried/half-dragged him out of the room. Fortunately, there was no one in the corridor. McCoy pulled Spock into his office, settled him in the nearest chair and began shaking him awake. "Spock," he called, "Wake up, Spock. It's over. Come on -- tell me what happened to Jim. Wake up!"

Spock twitched, shivered, and raised his head. His eyes rolled aimlessly for a moment before fixing on McCoy. "...happened...?" he whispered. "That... that is what... it is like... for you. So that's what it's like!"

"Yes," said McCoy, quietly and very seriously. "Now you know."

"Indications... before..." Spock was still disoriented. "Leila, Zarabeth... I made myself forget. But this..." He shook his head hard.

"Spock, how is the Captain? Try to remember. How is Jim?"

"Jim..." Spock blinked rapidly, took a few deep breaths, and regained some control over himself. "He is... much improved. I think... almost completely unified. The doubling faded as the... treatment progressed. She was successful."

"Some treatment," McCoy smiled. "But it worked?"

"Yes." Spock straightened his shoulders and pulled his Vulcan impassivity over him like a tattered cloak. "Human sexuality has some extraordinary applications. The connections to basic vitality are... amazing." His face turned a little more expressionless than before. "Roantree was correct; my attempts were insufficient without any of... that component. I did not even think of it."

"Vulcans don't speak of such things, even among themselves," McCoy couldn't help commenting.

"True." Spock looked away. I am greatly fatigued, Doctor. If you have no further need of me at the present..."

"No. Go get some sleep, Spock. I'll keep an eye on Jim."

Spock noded acknowledgment, got up and marched solemnly out of the office. McCoy waited until he was gone, then went to the cabinet and got out a shot of bourbon for himself, and sat down at his desk to drink it slowly while he thought things over.

* * *

"Chris?"

Nurse Chapel snapped her head up, forgetting the tapes on her desk. "'Pendy, what are you doing here? I thought you'd be at dinner."

"I can eat later. I wanted to catch you alone." Uhura crossed the space between them and sat down beside the desk. "How's the Captain?"

Christine actually blushed. Uhura was startled to see it. "Ah, he's improving dramatically, Dr. McCoy says."

"~~Ham~~. Can he have visitors?"

"Oh, no. No... Just medical personnel, and Spock."

"What about Quannechota?"

Christine gulped. "Well, Doctor McCoy did have her and Roantree come in and look at him..."

"And Quann's still there." Uhura fixed Christine with a cool, level stare. "I came looking for her, couldn't find anyone in their cabin, came in here and bumped in Roantree. She told me where Quanna was, and what she was doing."

"Look, 'Penda, anything that works --"

"And it works because he loves her. I know." Uhura's gaze wandered off to the walls, the lights, and finally the desk. "It's over between us, then; in this time-line as well as that one."

"'Pendy, I'm honestly sorry."

"It's all right, Chris. Life just works out that way, doesn't it?" She gave Christine a brief, sad, knowing look. Christine couldn't meet it. "Anyway, you've seen my medical exam tape, haven't you?"

"Yes. Exposed and reacting -- more than most."

"Me, and DeSalle, and all the other Security people who beamed down to the Guardian in that other time-line. Correct?"

"Right. You know what it means?" Christine watched her narrowly, supressing a sudden irritation desire to bolt and run.

"Umm. With me, with them, the other time-line memories dominate. We're more there, you might say. No that it's surprising..." Uhura glanced at her nails. They were rough and bitten, not at all like their usual manicured selves. "Here, what have I done for the past month? Open hailing frequencies? Polish my nails? Try not to die of boredom or tension over things I couldn't help? And what was I doing there, for the last nine months? Hell, Chris, it's not surprising that I remember everything clearly. Everything..." She caught Christine again on her dark-eyed stare. "And you? Do you still agree with me?"

"About what?" I know damn well what! Why am I so reluctant?

"About getting Coordinator Jenneth Roantree accepted in Starfleet." Uhura flashed her best cheerful smile. "Not giving up on that hope, are you?"

"N-no... I just..." May as well say it now. "Dammit, Penda, are you sure we're doing the right thing? Are you so sure Roantree will go along with it? She wants a ship, yes -- and so do the rest of her people -- but they want to stay together, and independent, and --"



"Easily done. Starfleet has arrangements for whole-crew transfers from commercial vessels, right up to Scoutship class. The Brass has the sense not to break up a good team." ...as witness the Captain and Spock, who could have been promoted long ago...

"But- but they want to go to Earth, first -- see what it's like, see where they fit in..." Christine faltered, realizing that she shouldn't have opened that line of argument.

"Yes, and they'll find an Earth where they don't fit in," Uhura answered, relentless as truth. "I couldn't help but notice the complaints of the Social-Psychology and Anthro teams. Our guests will be miserable on Earth, and I imagine

they'll be just as glad to go back to space again."

"'Miserable' doesn't begin to describe it! Penda, can't you understand -- my Lord, doesn't anybody realize?! These people have lived all their lives in a society totally without government, a culture that looks on any form of government as tyranny -- and they hate tyranny with a passion that's hard for us to understand, much less match. Now just how in the galaxy do you expect to convince these people to join a -- a military organization? Which is exactly what Starfleet is! The nearest thing to Starfleet, in their knowledge, would be the old Earth Navy, or maybe old NASA. Now how are you going to convince Jenneth Roantree and her people --?"

"'Old NASA', right," Uhura laughed. "They practically worship old NASA! Have you seen Ann Bailey -- Bailey the bad-tempered, Bailey the Purist -- drooling over technical manuals, petting her old NASA specs-book, practically genuflecting in front of the engines? Look, Chris, if that old troglodyte can be seduced by our science, all of them can. I know the Social Science teams haven't had any luck winning them over to our culture, but that's not the important thing; it's the science they want, and they'll do whatever they have to to get it. There is a chance, dammit! And we've got to take that chance if we're going to fight this vicious old prejudice against women. They'll take us up on that, certainly; Djamball knows, they're used to equality."

"Yes, they are," Christine conceded, remembering how annoyed the Anarchists had been at some of the Social-Psych team's attempts to teach them "common sex-role models". "They believe in equality, all right. They get upset at attempts to change that."

"Just so. People get upset when somebody tries to take away something they already have. Most people don't care about politics unless it threatens to oppress them. No oppression, no real concern. People are like that; they don't want to be bothered with such esoteric questions, not really. They'd rather be left alone to pursue their personal lives. So where's the conflict, Chris? Our guests remember 'government' as an ancient tyranny that used to enslave and rob them, and that's surely not what we've got today. Why, the rights and freedoms we have today, compared with the way things once were... Oh, they'll accept, Chris. Nobody but a really fanatic Anarchist would complain about the Federation, and these people aren't fanatics -- they're just dedicated, science-worshipping space-explorers. The nearest thing they have to an ideological purist is Ann Bailey, and she's already won over."

"I don't know." Christine shook her head, bowled over by Uhura's argument, but sure there was a flaw in it somewhere. That's illogical, as Spock would say... "Once they learn the truth, it might be difficult to convince them, science or no science."

Uhura grinned knowingly, as if on sure ground. "'The difficult we do today, the impossible takes a little longer,'" she quoted. "Come on, Chris, we've got the battle half-won. We've even got a 'cause' to involve them in -- equality of women! Don't tell me Jenneth Roantree wouldn't take a lively interest in that, especially if part of the battle includes getting a ship of her own. I've been eavesdropping shamelessly on the communications banks, and --"

"Penda, that's nasty."

"Oh, not everybody's: just the relevant Starfleet channels -- which I'm supposed to monitor anyway -- and the 'Social-Science teams' reports, which isn't restricted knowledge. The Soc-Sci teams have had no luck pushing our shaggy guests into Earth customs, and I've been sending select commentaries about that to Starfleet."

"The commanding officer is supposed to --"

"Spock's been busy down here. Scotty's in charge most of the time, and he doesn't want to touch this problem with a ten foot pole. He's got 'nae patience wi' the damned bureaucrats', as he says, and he's glad to let me handle the daily reports for him. I can relay damn-near anything I want to. You can guess how I've been slanting it."

"Not exactly." Christine looked down at the tapes on her desk. "What have you been passing on to Starfleet?"

"Nothing untrue: just that the Anarchists are unsuited for reintegration with Earth society, that they're hungry for knowledge and want to learn all they can, that they're eager to see this new open galaxy and all the worlds in it, that

Jenneth Roantree is Grade-A Command material and wants a good Starfleet ship, and that everyone who's studied her says she damn-well capable of handling it. True, right?"

"Not exactly the whole truth," Christine tried one more time. "Upenda, they are Anarchists. They're going to be cruelly disillusioned when they find out what Earth is like, and they may very well not like the rest of the Federation either. What makes you so sure that they'll accept a place in Starfleet, in exchange for all their shattered hopes?" Especially when they might have had... Bailey's plan... Brrr! Close...

"Chris..." Uhura shrugged elaborately. "What else can they do? There are Anarchist worlds in Federation space, yes, but none of them have the science or technology that Jenneth's people are so eager to get. Oh, they could settle on an Anarchistic world somewhere, and go live as Anarchists as much as they like, but if they want to step out into space they're going to have to accept the fact that the Federation exists, that there are interplanetary laws, enforced by Starfleet, and that if they want to take part in the benefits of interplanetary society -- such as getting the miracles of modern science -- then they'll have to play the game by our rules. 'Our science for your compliance'. It's a fair exchange, and they believe in fair exchanges. If they come to understand it by slow, easy steps, they'll accept it. Even if they learn it fast, hard and painfully, what can they do about it? Sit on an asteroid somewhere and sulk?"

"God knows what they'd do..." We don't really know what they're capable of...

"What, declare war? 41 against the galaxy?" Uhura laughed. "Come on Chris, be serious. They'll come around eventually. Yes, I'll think they'll even be willing to accept a place in Starfleet. Captain Roantree certainly will; the others want science, but she wants a ship -- a ship like this one -- and where else is she to get one? Overcoming a prejudice in the process should engage her conscience thoroughly enough, and she's psychologically flexible enough to accept the conditions that go with a Starship. Political ideology is all very easy to believe in, but match it against something concrete, like a ship, and it begins to look very thin."

Christine Chapel didn't answer. For some reason she was remembering a line from Roantree's song.

"...She asks us easy questions. We tell her easy lies."

"41 innocent barbarians against a whole galaxy, a game too big for them to change the rules..." Christine sighed. "No, I guess there isn't much choice."

"You'll help then?"

"Help Jenneth Roantree get a Starfleet ship?" Christine gave a sincere-looking smile, thinking fast. "Damn right I will."

"Fine," Uhura beamed. "Now I can head up to dinner. Catch you later?"

"Not until tomorrow, probably. I still have these tapes to go over, and god only knows when Dr. McCoy will bounce in. Try to catch me at breakfast."

"Sure thing." Uhura rose, gracefully as always, and left. The minute the door shut behind her, Christine punched the intercom to the bridge. M'Ress answered.

"New medical reports to be forwarded to Starfleet Command," Christine clipped out. Do it right! She planned her words carefully, remembering that this might be the only such message she could send past McCoy's stubborn ignorance and Uhura's conniving. "Updated report on mental condition of the guests of the USS Enterprise," she began. "Considering their unsuitability for Earth society, their second hope -- that of settling in their former community on Earth -- will most probably be abandoned. However, it is possible to fulfill their primary wish, which is for a ship of their own." Say it right, girl! "Given a reliable light speed-ship, they will most probably take up an occupation as interstellar explorers with long-term hopes of settling on one of the frontier worlds..." Believe it, Starfleet! Believe it!

* * *

"Spock?"

"No. Quannechota."

"Oh... Yes."

Kirk opened his eyes and looked at her. She was beautiful, as always: all black silk and honey-gold satin, with sleepy brown eyes and a slow, lovely smile spreading across her fine, spare face. He could see her clearly, with no double-vision, no echoed perception, nothing to mar the sight of her long golden body stretched out beside him."

That's over, he understood. No second voice in my skull... only one of me... Not counting Jenneth, of course. I can deal with that later. He raised one hand and looked at it, flexing the fingers, marvelling at how clear and sharp the feeling was, and the connection between seeing and feeling. He touched his left eye, confirming that it was still there and the scars were gone. I'm whole again... Cautiously, he searched his memories and reactions. They still conflicted, but the horrible self-division over them was no longer there. The memories... No, I'll straighten them out later. I did before... Wolf and Lamb... I think I finally, really, appreciate the value of the Wolf. Poor Wolf... what did he want, anyway? Simple, animal things... food, drink, his personal cave all to himself, and a mate... He glanced at Quannechota, then looked away. Still divided about her people, how I'll deal with them, Jenneth... conflicting loyalties... but I've faced that before. There has to be a way. I'll find one... or make one... for all I owe them.

Quannechota nibbled at his collarbone. He turned to her, smiling and traced the line of her cheek with one gentle finger. "Thank you," he said simply. "This isn't the first time you've made me remember how good life is."

"I am grateful," murmured Quannechota, drowsily kissing his shoulder.

"Grateful..." Kirk sighed. Nobody likes ingratitude... Hell, get on with it. "Quanna, would you do two things for me? One, find my clothes. Two, find Dr. McCoy and tell him I want to see him. I have a lot of explaining to do."

"As you wish, Love." Quannechota got up, turned up the lights and rumaged through the closet until she found Kirk's clothes and boots. She playfully tossed them to him, then scooped up her own gear and sat down to put it on. They dressed in companionable silence, Kirk lovingly watching her as if every sight of her might be the last. Quannechota briefly shooed him off the couch and pulled the covers straight. Kirk took two steps, realized he wasn't up to much walking yet, and dropped back onto the couch the minute Quannechota was done. She delicately kissed his nose, and went out to fetch Dr. McCoy. Kirk lay back and relaxed while there was still time for it. He slid his hands up and down his body, curious about the changes. Fatter? Thinner? Doesn't matter... It works, and it doesn't hurt. Worked well enough for... he smiled, remembering that. Incredible... I can still feel the echoes... ah, Quanna.

Then McCoy came scurrying through the door, portable psychotricorder in hand. He skidded to a halt by the couch, looked at Kirk, looked at the diagnostic panel, looked at the hooting tricorder, and looked at Kirk again. "Jim?" he asked. "You're back? Back, ah, together?" ...you still look like death warmed over, but changed...

"Pretty much," Kirk grinned at him. "I'm weak as a kitten, having a little trouble focusing my left eye... and my memories are all mixed up, and I'm pulled two ways about what to do in the future... but I'm in one piece again. Thanks, Bones."

"It wasn't all my doing." McCoy sat down beside Kirk and took his hand, a little dismayed at how thin it still was. "But however it happened, welcome home." Does he know who was involved and how? That Spock... No, best leave that for now.

"Home..." Kirk shut his eyes for a moment and clutched McCoy's hand so hard that it hurt. "...can't tell you how good it is to be here."

I can make some guesses, thought McCoy, patiently holding on. "It's good to have you back, Jim."

Kirk sighed and pulled his eyes open. "I've got to get oriented. How long was I... out?"



"Two weeks. We're heading for Starbase 12, should get there in 20 days or so. I want you to rest until then, okay?"

"I can't," Kirk let go of McCoy's hand and pulled himself upright. "There's too much to do. All of Jenneth's people on board?"

"All 41 of them. They're in the V.I.P. quarters now, busy studying everything off the library computer, getting gawdawful beer out of the food-synthesizers, cluttering up the area rec-room and driving the Social-Sciences team out of their minds. In short, our guests are doing all right."

"They don't know then..." Kirk gnawed the inside of his lip. "No doubt Spock put blocks on the computer, just as I did. But they'll find out, sooner or later." He turned back to McCoy. "They want to go to Earth, Bones. They think they can take up their old lives again, fit right in, find their dead alive again and their city rebuilt. I let them go on believing that, so they'd help me set time right, but all along I knew that there's no place for them on our Earth. There's no home for them to come back to."

"Aw, it may not be that bad, Jim." Is this another reason why you took that dive into the dark? ///Give him some hope... "Spock set the Social-Science teams to, uh, 'acclimatizing' your friends, getting them used to Earth society, sorta easing them in gradually."

"Hasn't worked, has it?"

"Uh, not yet..."

"It won't. I know Earth, and I know them." Kirk fixed his eyes on the ceiling, studying something far away and hard to reach. "Where in the galaxy do they belong? What can we give them to repay for all they've done?"

"How shoul I know? I'm a doctor, not an anthropologist. But we've got more social scientists on this ship than you can shake a stick at. We'll come up with something."

"Think hard. Think fast." Kirk swung his legs over the edge of the couch and rested his forehead in his hands. "Bones... Have you ever had occasion to hate yourself? I mean, really, justifiably, no-excuses hate... yourself?"

McCoy shuddered. "Yes," he said.

"It was like that for me, all those months, in that other line. In this one, it's been more than a month of -- of being afraid of myself; afraid of what would happen to me, what I'd become. Inside the Guardian, I got both... and I think I'd rather die than go through that again." Kirk ground the heels of his hands against his eyes and began to shake.

McCoy put an arm around his shoulders and gripped hard. "Jim, it's over. Over. You're done with it. Remember that."

"That's just the trouble; it's not over." Kirk looked up, and the terrible weariness in his eyes wrung McCoy's heart. "Bones, I'm scared. To put it the worst way, I'm afraid of Jenneth Roantree. We're linked, closer than twins, and if she feels something strongly I'll feel it too. She's on a collision course with one hell of a disillusionment: about Earth, about the Federation, about Starfleet and this ship and me and... everything. I've got to find some way out for her, soften the blow before it hits. I've got to save her -- for the sake of my own sanity. Now do you understand?"

"Gawd yes!" Break the link! Is there any way? Ask Spock... "You said that was the worst reason. What's the best one?"

"The best...?" Kirk smiled. "I'm not used to seeing myself in a good light." He studied the backs of his hands. "I can't put it very well, but... I owe them a lot, Bones. They lost their ship, their town, and a lot of lives to bring me home. They saved me from going crazy with loneliness. They even gave me back... my wife."

"I know." ...Her? Miramanee? ...I somehow don't think so... but never mind that now. "Remember though, that it wasn't all one-sided generosity. They had their own reasons for everything they did; they mean to get something in exchange."

"And they haven't gotten it yet." Kirk took a deep breath and straightened, face as grim and bleak as winter. "I may not be an Anarchist, but I think I understand personal responsibility as well as they do. I owe them -- we all owe them -- for a whole damned universe. I mean to see to it that they get decently repaid, in their own terms. I'll do that for them, Bones. I'll do it if it kills me."

It won't. Not if I can help it, thought McCoy, holding tight as much for his own sake as Kirk's. "If there's anything I can do..."

"Believe me, I'll tell you. I think I'm going to need all the help I can get." He glanced around the room, looking for a communications outlet. "Right now, help me out of here and into someplace where I can look at those social scientists' reports. Also send Spock in. We have a lot to talk about."

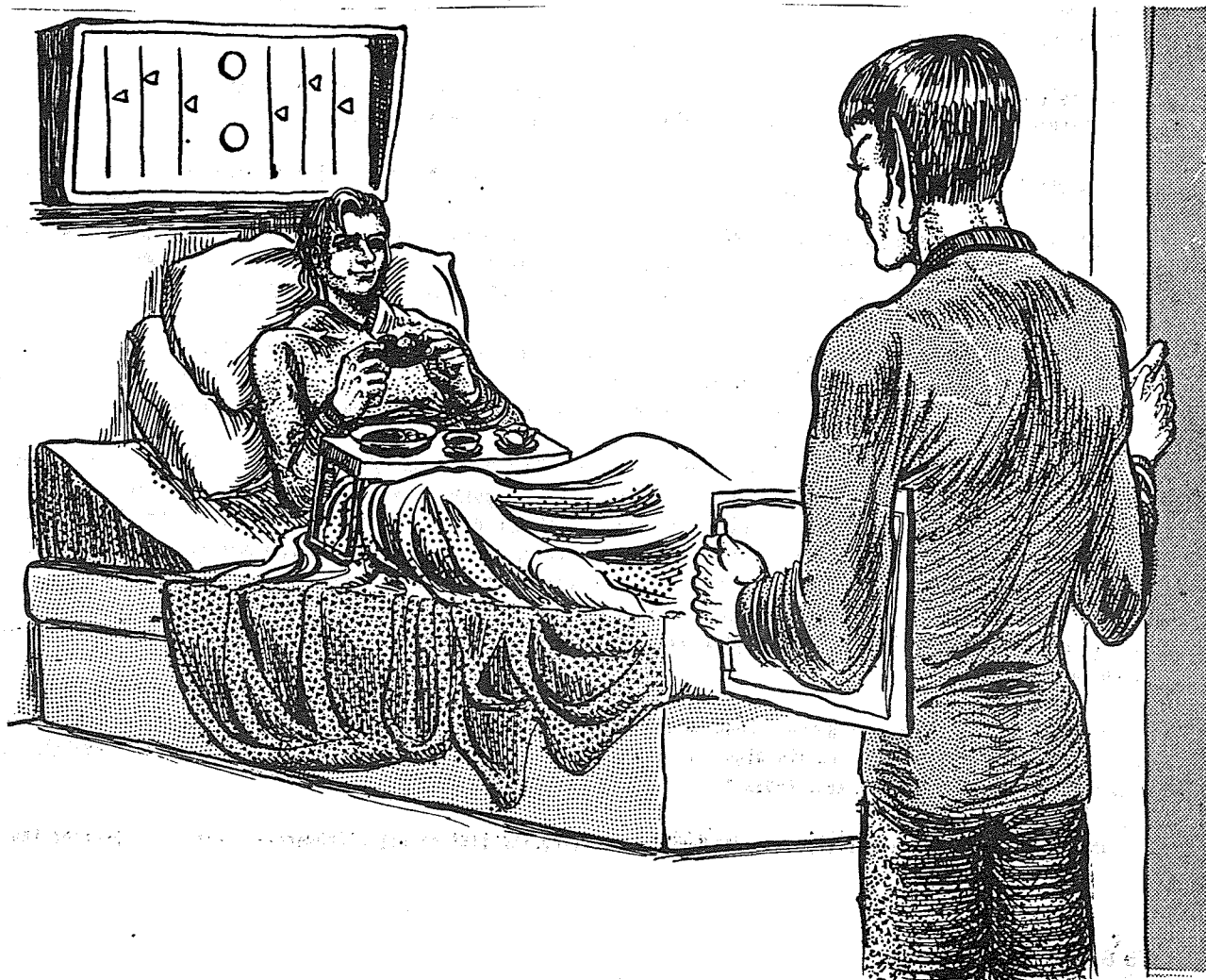
"Sure," promised McCoy. You don't know the half of it.

Stardate 5910.4, Dr. McCoy recording:

JIM'S BACK IN ONE PIECE, AT LAST. HE'S STILL SHAKY, BUT NO WONDER, AFTER ALL HE'S BEEN THROUGH. HE'S ITCHING TO GET BACK TO WORK, AS ALWAYS -- GOOD SIGN -- BUT I'LL BE KEEPING HIM IN SICKBAY FOR SEVERAL DAYS. HE NEEDS TO KEEP QUIET AND GAIN WEIGHT AND GET HIS STRENGTH BACK, AND I WANT TO RUN A COMPLETE PSYCHOTRICORDER READING ON HIM. HE SEEMS SUBTLY CHANGED IN A LOT OF WAYS...

THEN AGAIN, SO ARE ALL OF US. UNIVERSES CONVERGED, AND WE ALL FELT SOMETHING OF IT. WE RETAIN ELEMENTS OF OUR OTHER SELVES, OUR MEMORIES FROM THAT OTHER TIME-LINE. BESIDES, WE'VE ALL HAD DISTURBING CONTACT WITH JENNETH'S PEOPLE; JUST DEALING WITH THEM, TRYING TO CONFORM WITH THEIR THINKING, EVEN SUPERFICIALLY, CAN BE ... WELL, DISORIENTING. IT'S DAMNED DIFFICULT TO SEE OR KEEP TRACK OF THE CHANGES, SINCE WE'RE ALL AFFECTED BY THEM -- KIND OF LIKE TRYING TO LOOK AT YOUR OWN NOSE WITHOUT A MIRROR. I'D HOPED THAT SPOCK WOULD STAY OBJECTIVE, HELP ME STRAIGHTEN THIS OUT, BUT HE'S BEEN DEEPLY AFFECTED BY THAT RITUAL THAT QUANNECHOTA PUT HIM THROUGH, SO NOBODY HERE IS REALLY OBJECTIVE ANYMORE. I DON'T KNOW WHAT THE HELL I CAN DO ABOUT THIS, EXCEPT MY USUAL JOB OF KEEPING AN EYE ON EVERYBODY AND HOPING THE PSYCHOTRICORDER READINGS HAVEN'T BEEN AFFECTED BY THE TIME-CHANGE...

DAMN! ALL I CAN TELL IS WHETHER PEOPLE ARE HEALTHY OR NOT -- I CAN'T TELL IF THEY'RE 'RIGHT' OR NOT... THEN AGAIN, IS THAT ANY OF MY BUSINESS? I'M A DOCTOR, NOT A PHILOSOPHER.



Spock entered the intensive care unit cautiously, not sure what to expect, and paused in the doorway for a few seconds to gather preliminary data. He saw Kirk propped up on several pillows, grimacing at the blandness of the food, nonetheless eating like a polite but hungry wolf. The animal enthusiasm was oddly reassuring. Spock waited until Kirk finished, then stepped quietly into the room.

Kirk looked up. "Spock!" The old familiar smile spread across his thinned face, and he reached out both hands. "Spock -- Oh damn, it's good to see you! See only one of you... Come here. What's the date? What's the ship's status? I've got so much to catch up on..."

Spock removed the emptied tray and sat demurely at the foot of the bed. "I am pleased to see that your health has improved, Captain," he said, carefully settling his clipboard on his lap. "The date is 5910.6, the ship's systems are in good condition save for a minor malfunction in one of the food dispensers, which is currently being repaired. Our present course and speed -- "

"Uh-hmm..." Kirk lay back on the pillows and grinned, listening to Spock recite lists of details, soaking up the welcome sound and feel of his old routine. "... it's real ... it's real, one more time."

"I beg your pardon?"

"Nothing. I'm just so happy to be back ... and in one piece." He shivered, remembering. Doubled ... the pain ... Spock ...

"Are you cold? Perhaps another blanket ... "

"No, I'm fine." Impulsively, Kirk sat up and reached for Spock's nearest hand, not noticing that the Vulcan visibly flinched away. "I owe you a lot, Spock. I remember ... you were there, you helped me put the two sides back together, after Bones came in, and before Quanna -- "

"I merely did what was necessary, Captain," Spock cut in fast, not wanting Kirk to finish the thought. "Logic required that I do everything in my power to prevent Starfleet from losing a valuable officer."

"Yes, yes," Kirk grinned. Just like old times. "'One does not thank logic.' But I'm thanking you anyway, my friend."

Spock lowered his eyes and didn't answer, acutely aware of the feel of Kirk's hand holding his own and the sound of those priceless words. The sensations seemed to echo in his mind. Lingering effect of the recent psychic and nervous activity, he labelled it. Control ... His other hand tightened unconsciously on the clipboard.

After a long moment, Kirk sighed, released Spock's hand and slid back on the pillows. "McCoy won't let me out of her, not even on light duty, for another few days. If I'm going to be stuck here, I can at least do my homework." His face tightened briefly, revealing sharp bones. "How are Jenneth's people getting along, and what are we going to do with them?"

Spock raised his clipboard, glad to be back on familiar ground. "So far they know only that our technology is much more advanced than theirs, that our galaxy is more heavily human-populated, and that our social customs are quite different. Thanks to Dr. McCoy's efforts, they are highly impressed with our medical techniques. Thanks to Mr. Scott's verbal indiscretion, they are aware that they would not be welcome on Earth, but they do not fully understand why. Our Social-Science teams have made little headway in adjusting them to Earth cultural norms or to Federation society in general. I have, of course, voice-printed blocks on the computer's memory banks, so as to conceal all references to governments, laws, and military organizations. We have sent regular reports to Starfleet Command, but as yet we have received no further orders concerning the problem."

In other words, Starfleet doesn't know what to do with them either," Kirk thoughtfully gnawed his lip. "We haven't much time before Starfleet makes up its mind, or the Anarchists learn the truth. Meanwhile, it's still my ball game. What are my options, Spock? Give me some ideas."

"There are several possibilities," Spock began, studying the list on his clipboard. "First, to present the realities

of Federation society in a favorable way, so that the Anarchists will be reconciled to the existence of laws and governments. So far, efforts in this direction have been less than 30% successful. Second, while withholding all the facts, give the Anarchists a planet to colonize -- but with no means of departure. By the time they discover the unpleasant truth, they will already be committed to settling their new world, and may no longer have much interest in customs of interplanetary society."

"Not very likely," Kirk judged. "They'll guess that they've been exiled from civilized company. I mentioned to Jenneth that we did something similar to Khan and his gang."

"That may have been unwise, Captain."

"It was unavoidable. It won't make any difference anyway; exile's a common punishment where they come from, and they'll recognize it soon enough. Besides, these are science-worshippers with a long cultural dream of space-flight. Strand them on some empty world, and even so, in a few generations -- or maybe less -- they'll be constructing crude spaceships and fumbling into the sky again."

"That will at least solve the problem temporarily."

"Uhuh. Out of sight, out of mind; let the next generation of bureaucrats worry about it. Starfleet may like that idea. Go on. Any other possibilities?"

"The Anarchists have repeatedly expressed desire for another ship. It is possible that Starfleet may give them a small ship and then consider its obligation discharged."

"You mean, strand them in space and let them learn the facts the hard way?"

"It is possible. Starfleet is lamentably partial to such incomplete solutions. Then again, one should not overlook the possibility that upon learning how vastly they are outnumbered and outgunned, the Anarchists may resign themselves quietly to the situation and content themselves with making good use of the ship."

"Buy them off," Kirk sighed, "with a world or a ship. They might accept it. I almost hope they will..."

"'Almost'?"

"But I still have my doubts. What other options?"

"Fourth, they could be conducted to a world of similarly-inclined people, preferably outside Federation, Klingon, or Romulan territory, where they need not be troubled by government in any form."

"Hmm, that sounds a little better... especially if they could have the ship and the technology they want, too."

"That may be difficult to accomplish, Captain. Starfleet may react unfavorably to the idea of founding a possible military rival in unclaimed space."

"Yes, I know all about Starfleet's tendency to paranoia," Kirk laughed grimly. "It's common to all military thinking. There's a way around it, though. Make the suggestion directly to the Federation Council, who'd be a little more favorable to the idea. Ah, and Starfleet might be mollified if we could put the Anarchist settlement fairly close to the Klingon or Romulan borders, maybe on the Rim. Convince the Admirals that the Anarchists would be more likely to fight our enemies than us. Hell, that could work! The Anarchists already hate the Romulans -- and if the Federation keeps supplying Jenneth's people with scientific information and tools, we could keep their good will even after they found out that we have governments. We'd look good by comparison. That's the answer, Spock! The best solution all around... Why are you staring at me like that?"

Spock quickly looked back at his clipboard. "Forgive me. I was surprised to observe your considerable and unexpected knowledge of political intrigue."

"Uhh... You mean I wasn't so devious before?" Kirk glanced nervously at the backs of his hands. "I guess... having to deal with the Anarchists, and with my own crew, without Starfleet to back me up, I must have learned fast. I didn't even realize I was doing it. heh! Nice to know I can still learn something new, at my age!" He shook himself slightly. "Anyway, that's the best option so far. Do you have any others?"

"Affirmative. Fifth, it is remotely possible that the Anarchists might be resettled in an uninhabited section of Earth. Factors against this include the shortage of such community, and the inevitability of the Anarchists coming into contact with their neighbors."

"Is that so inevitable? I know there are big chunks of Earth that are pretty wild and woolly -- have been every since the Eugenetic Wars, in fact... Hey!"

"It is true that Earth retains a few pockets of pre-Federation culture, but 91% of these are anti-technological, and the rest are extremely primitive."

"Luddites again. Jenneth's people will be worse off than when they started."

"Also, probability is 4856.8 to 1 that the Federation will not allow this option."

"True. Are there any others?"

"There is one. In view of the Anarchists' considerable personal talents, it is possible that Starfleet may find occupations for them after a suitable course of psychological readjustment in a rehabilitation facility."

"In a what?" Kirk snapped upright, staring at Spock in disbelief and outrage. "You mean, lead these people innocently into a -- a prison or madhouse, and then brainwash them? Force them to forget all they've ever lived by, and make them into nice obedient little robots? Treat them like the worst kind of criminal or lunatic? Spock, I can't believe it of you!"

"Jim..." Spock stared at him, wincing away from the shocking outburst. "I did not say that I --"

"They're not crazy, and they haven't broken any laws -- just the opposite! They saved the whole goddamn Federation, the whole galaxy! Is this the kind of reward they can expect? What the hell kind of --"

"Captain, you are behaving irrationally," Spock cut in with his best Official Vulcan voice. "I am, as you ordered, listing all possibilities -- not merely the most desirable or the most probable. Indeed, the odds against Starfleet choosing this option are quite remote; I would say, on the order of 3932.7 to --"

"Spare me the details. Let's just say it's totally out of the question."

"As you wish." Spock gave Kirk a long, worried look. "But if I may venture to ask a personal question, Captain, why do you react to this suggestion with such disproportionate outrage? You had never before shown such reactions to the mention of psychological rehabilitation."

"Maybe because I never gave it much thought before. Something Jenneth said made me wonder about it, and the more I thought of it the less I liked it. What do 'rehabilitation facilities' do with people, anyway? Haven't you ever wondered? We saw what happened on one of them. Remember Tantalus 5?"

"Jim, that was certainly not a typical example." Spock's gaze was searching, anxious. "I know that your experiences there were most unpleasant, but you must not allow one unusual case to prejudice you against --"

"Prejudice?" Kirk laughed. "No. Logic! Consider this, my Vulcan friend; a megalomaniac managed to take over one of those 'facilities' and run it as an absolute dictatorship, brainwashing people into obedient slaves -- and he got away with it until he was caught by a single accident. If a tyranny like that was possible, then just how are those rehab-colonies run? What happens to people who get sent to them? Do you know?"

Spock had to think that one over for a full half-minute before he could come up with a reasonable argument. "I do know this, Captain: one Harcourt Fenton Mudd 'graduated' from such an establishment with no marked improvement in his character. The Anarchists appear to be equally strong-minded and unamenable to change. This is one of the reasons that I gave this option such a low possibility."

Kirk relaxed a little. "In any case, out of the question. What's left?"

"Even more improbably choices, such as shooting them all, or abandoning them in Klingon or Romulan territory -- none of which the Federation Council is like to consider."

"But Starfleet might," Kirk frowned.

"Jim..." Spock edged toward him, staring shamelessly. "Is this low opinion of Starfleet's collective wisdom a ... recent acquisition? Did you develop this attitude while in the alternate universe?"

Kirk glanced up, studied Spock's face, and smiled grimly. "No, not entirely. I've had some doubts for a long time, though I admit I had lots of time to think about it there -- especially about that idiot stunt of sending an under-powered ship on a time-voyage in the first place. Hmmm, did Starfleet ever find out who sent that message from old Chicago?"

"Affirmative." Spock looked slightly relieved. "It was sent by a hitherto-unknown race of extremely long-lived beings, possibly the fabiled Preservers, who appear to have 'collected' the city as an archaeological treasure just before the tidal wave would have destroyed it. Apparently noticing our recent activity there, they sent another message to explain themselves."

"So I did that much, at least. Damn little, for all this time and suffering." Kirk leaned back and shut his eyes. He looked very tired.

"You should rest," Spock hinted, turning down the lights.

"Not yet." Kirk opened his eyes again. "There's still too much to do. I like that #4 option, and I'll have to work hard to get it. First thing I want to do is send a message to Starfleet Command ... and the Federation Colonization Department, and the Federation Council itself, and anyone else you can think of, saying that in my opinion -- and remember, I've known these people for several months -- that's the best thing to do with them."

"If you wish, I shall compose a brief report to that effect which you may record, and I shall personally see that it is sent to all relevant Federation departments."

"Fine, fine. It wouldn't hurt if you'd send a report of your own, backing me up."

"There is still the problem of persuading the Anarchists to accept this option. They are determined to return to Earth."

"I'll -- we'll think of something, some way to make them give up Earth ... Jesus." Kirk rubbed his eyes. "If all else fails, go ahead and tell them that there are governments on Earth. That should pretty well tear it. Be careful it doesn't tear too much..."

"You are certain that their intolerance would outweigh their homesickness, in this case?"

"I think so ... Well, I'll find out. Have to talk to them and the crew .. been away too long." He yawned hugely. "As soon as I get a little more sleep. Anything else, Spock?"

"Only one question." Spock fiddled momentarily with his clipboard. "For the purpose of clarifying the records: Jim

"Huh? Of course she is! We went through the whole ceremony. Isn't that in the log?"

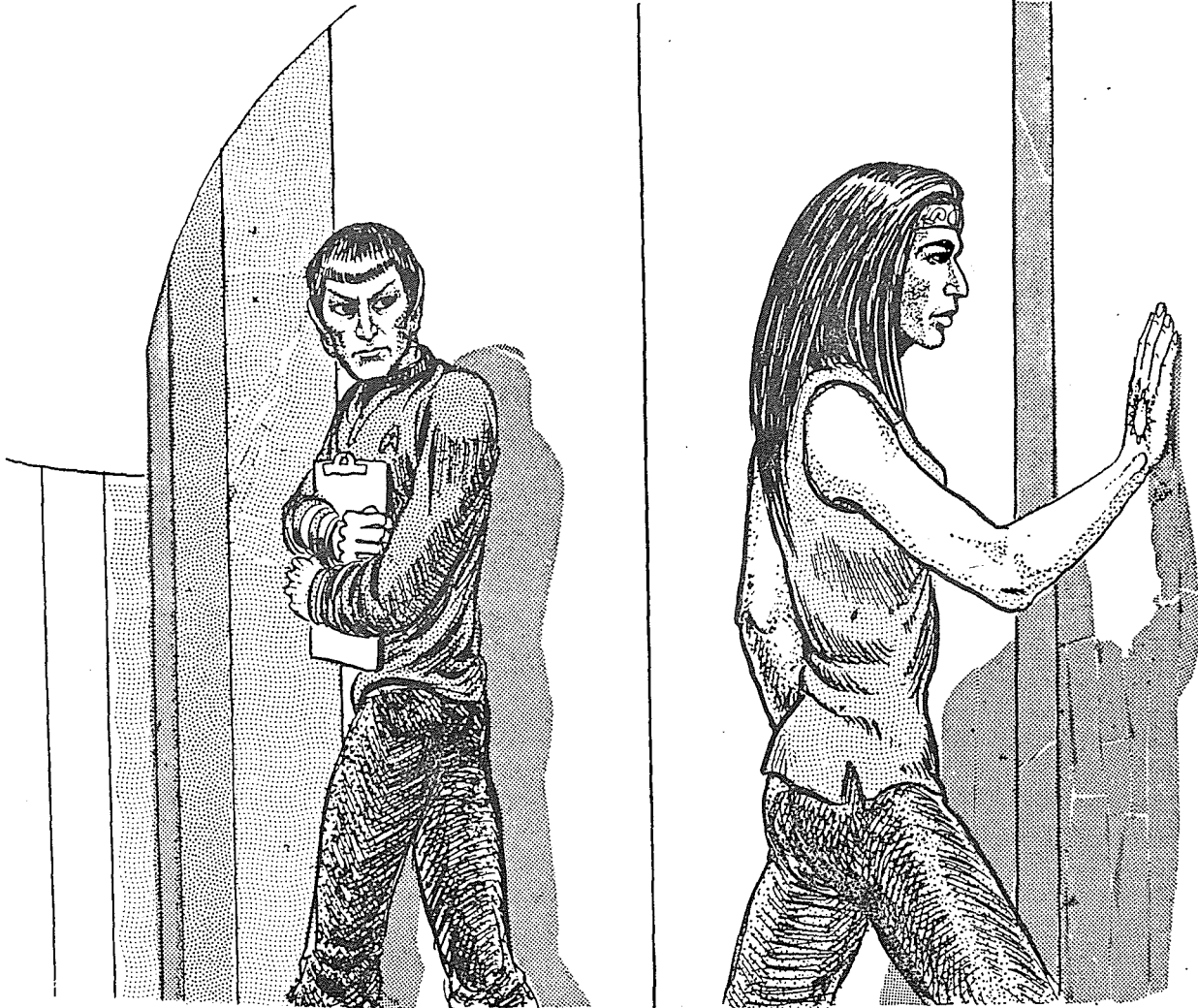
"I am not certain that Starfleet would consider that a legal arrangement."

"They damn-well better! Local customs, and all that. It's in the regulations; look it up. If any formal statement is needed, I'll make it. Can you take care of that for me?"

"Affirmative, Captain." Spock stood up and turned the area lights all the way down. "Sleep well."

"Uh-huh ... See you later." Kirk snuggled down in the pillows and settled himself for sleep.

Spock paused for a moment, looking down at him, then resolutely turned and went out. He was startled to see Quannachota waiting outside, and distinctly annoyed to see her slip past him into the room with Kirk. He watched the doors close behind her, thought for a while, then went off to write his report.



Stardate 5910.5, memo, Spock to McCoy:

I HAVE NOTED SOME DISTURBING EVIDENCE OF PERSONALITY CHANGE IN THE CAPTAIN REGARDING THE EVENTUAL DISPOSITION OF OUR GUESTS, ESPECIALLY SHOWING INCREASED HOSTILITY AND SUSPICION OF AUTHORITIES. COMPLETE PSYCHOLOGICAL EXAMINATION IS STRONGLY RECOMMENDED. I WILL CONTINUE TO OBSERVE THE CAPTAIN'S BEHAVIOR IN THE ANARCHISTS' PRESENCE, TO DETERMINE WHETHER OR NOT THEY ARE INFLUENCING HIM AND TO PREVENT ANY FURTHER SUCH INFLUENCE. I ALSO RECOMMEND THAT QUANNECHOTA'S VISITS TO HIM IN SICKBAY BE TERMINATED.

Stardate 5910.6, memo, McCoy to Spock:

I'VE RUN THE COMPLETE BATTERY OF PSYCHOLOGICAL TESTS ON THE CAPTAIN AND FOUND NO SIGN OF SEVER PERSONALITY CHANGE -- NOTHING BUT SOME VERY UNDERSTANDABLE PAINS LEFT OVER FROM HIS ORDEAL, AND AN EQUALLY UNDERSTABLE WORRY ABOUT THE FUTURE OF JENNETH'S PEOPLE. HIS HOSTILITY TOWARD AUTHORITIES HAS ALWAYS BEEN THERE, IF YOU'LL RECALL. HE'S NEVER LIKED BUREAUCRATS, RED TAPE OR OVERBEARING ADMIRALS -- AND NO DOUBT HE LIKES THEM EVEN LESS NOW THAT HE'S SEEN JENNETH'S PEOPLE MANAGING VERY WELL WITHOUT ALL THAT. I HONESTLY DON'T KNOW HOW MUCH OUR GUESTS ARE INFLUENCING HIM RIGHT NOW. BY ALL MEANS STAY WITH HIM AND OBSERVE, BUT DON'T TRY TO 'PROTECT' HIM TOO STRENUOUSLY; HE'LL NOTICE, THEY'LL NOTICE, AND NOBODY WILL LIKE IT. AS FOR QUANNECHOTA'S VISITS, THEY'RE CERTAINLY NOT DOING HIM ANY HARM -- AND HE'D PIN MY EARS BACK IF I TRIED TO STOP THEM. SHE'S HIS WIFE, DAMMIT!

"Lieutenant, please transmit these reports to the listed destinations."

"Yes, Mr. Spock." Uhura dutifully noted the destinations, looked up their coordinates, and punched out the first of them, frowning with puzzlement at some of the others. ...Federation Department of Interplanetary Colonization ... ? She glanced at the message readout as she relayed it, and did a fast double-take. The Captain? He's well again! ... he wants what?

The report was uncoded and fairly brief; it took only a few seconds to read. It took her several seconds to assimilate it, fit it into the pattern, gain some idea of how to deal with it, while she obediently tapped the relay buttons with unfeeling fingers. He can't do this! she seethed. Throw them out in some godforsaken corner of the galaxy, clean out of the Federation, off where they can't contaminate our nice, safe, proper Starfleet with their foreign ideas about freedom -- Damn! No! There's got to be a way ... Jim Kirk or no ... damn that man anyway ...

She made private tactical notes for the rest of the watch, and then went to find Jenneth Roantree.

Project Tape R-241, Roantree recording:

THIS SPOCK CHARACTER IS INTERESTING ALL RIGHT -- AND PECULIAR. HE STROLLED IN ON US AT LUNCH TODAY -- A 'SEASIDE PICNIC' IN THE RECREATION ROOM, WHICH SOMEBODY HAD FIXED UP TO LOOK LIKE AN OCEAN BEACH -- AND HE STOOD AROUND FOR A WHILE LOOKING AS IF HE DIDN'T EXACTLY KNOW WHAT HE WAS DOING THERE. A FEW PEOPLE GAVE HIM ODD LOOKS, A FEW MORE TRIED TO INVITE HIM INTO THE DANCING AROUND THE DRIFTWOOD CAMPFIRE (VERY REALISTIC, EXCEPT THAT IT DIDN'T GIVE OFF MUCH HEAT), BUT HE EXCUSED HIMSELF AND CAME OVER TO JOIN THE REST OF US AROUND THE PICNIC BASKET. THERE WAS PLENTY TO GO AROUND, IN FACT I WAS HAVING TROUBLE FINISHING MY PLATEFULL, SO I INVITED HIM TO DIG IN AND ENJOY HIMSELF. HE ACTUALLY BLUSHED. WEIRD ...

WELL, HE DID NIBBLE CAUTIOUSLY AT THE SALAD, BUT AFTER A FEW BITES HE GAVE THAT UP AND STARTED ASKING QUESTIONS. I MUST ADMIT, HE WASN'T AS ANNOYING ABOUT IT AS A LOT OF THE SOCIAL SCIENTISTS WHO'VE BEEN ON OUR BACKS FOR THE PAST MONTH; HE SEEMED GENUINELY FRIENDLY. FOR INSTANCE, HE ASKED WHY I WAS TRYING TO FINISH OFF MY FOOD WHEN I WAS OBVIOUSLY STUFFED, AND WHEN I EXPLAINED THAT IT'S BAD MANNERS TO WASTE FOOD -- EVEN IF YOU MISJUDGE THE SIZE OF YOUR PLATE -- HE SEEMED TO UNDERSTAND. IN FACT, HE LOOKED ALMOST IMPRESSED. HE EVEN OFFERED TO HELP ME FINISH OFF MY PLATEFULL, WHICH WAS NICE OF HIM EVEN IF HE DIDN'T KNOW WHAT THAT USUALLY MEANS. NOBODY TOLD HIM EITHER, THOUGH A FEW PEOPLE GIGGLED. IT MADE ME STOP AND WONDER JUST WHAT KIND OF HUSBAND HE'D MAKE ... THERE'D BE NO PROBLEM WITH MEALS, ANYWAY; HE'D EAT ALL THE (YECH) VEGETABLES, AND I COULD HAVE ALL THE MEAT.

AFTERWARD, I SHOWED HIM HOW TO MAKE A WET-CONSTRUCTION SANDCASTLE. WOULD YOU BELIEVE HE'D NEVER DONE IT BEFORE! REALLY! HERE HE'S VISITED HUNDREDS OF DIFFERENT WORLDS, WHILE I'VE NEVER SEEN MY OWN SEA-COAST, OR FOR THAT MATTER ANY WATER BIGGER THAN GITCHEE-COUMEE, BUT I'M THE ONE WHO KNOWS HOW TO MAKE A SANDCASTLE. HE SAT AND WATCHED, PERFECTLY FASCINATED, WHILE I DUG THE SLIP-WELL AND PILED UP THE RAMPARTS AROUND IT AND DRIBBED WET SAND ON THE WALL-TOPS TO MAKE SPIRES AND TOWERS AND BUTTRESSES. WHILE I WAS DRIBBLING ON A COUPLE OF EXTRA-FANCY WATCHTOWERS, HE COMMENTED THAT 'THE COMPLETED WORK BEARS A REMARKABLE RESEMBLANCE TO THE ANCIENT N'HARR FORTRESS OF THE CENTRAL VULCAN LOWLANDS.' 'MAYBE,' I JOKED. 'THE N'HARR FORTRESS OF THE CENTRAL VULCAN LOWLANDS WAS MADE THE SAME WAY.' HE THOUGHT I WAS SERIOUS, AND HE SAT BACK AND THOUGHT IT OVER. AFTER A WHILE HE SAID, 'THAT IS NOT IMPOSSIBLE. THOUGH THE N'HARR REGION IS COMPLETELY WATERLESS TODAY, IT IS THEORIZED THAT THE FORTRESS WAS ONCE SURROUNDED BY A SHALLOW SEA.'

NEEDLESS TO SAY, THAT SURPRISED ME. 'HOW,' I ASKED, 'COULD A WHOLE SEA DISAPPEAR BEFORE A BUILDING COULD?' HE SAID THAT

THE LAST GREAT VULCAN WAR BEFORE THE 'REFORMS OF SURAK' DID VAST ECOLOGICAL DAMAGE TO THE WHOLE PLANET -- MORE THAN ENOUGH TO DRY UP A SMALL SEA. I JUST SAT ON MY HEELS AND STARED AT HIM 'WHAT THE HELL KIND OF IDIOTS,' I FINALLY ASKED, 'WOULD DO SUCH A SUICIDAL THING? WHAT KIND OF LUNATICS WOULD DRY UP A WHOLE OCEAN JUST TO SWAT AN ENEMY?'

HE GOT INDIGNANT OVER THAT, AND TRIED TO MAKE SOME SORT OF CONE BACK ABOUT EARTH'S WARS. I'M AFRAID WE LAUGHED AT HIM. 'WHAT KIND OF HISTORIES HAVE YOU BEEN READING?' I ASKED HIM. 'EVEN THE WORST OF OUR WARS DIDN'T GET AS SUICIDAL AS THAT.'

OH, YOU SHOULD HAVE SEEN HIS EYEBROWS GO UP! HE PRESSED ME FOR DETAILS. I TOLD ABOUT WORLD WAR TWO, WHICH IS THE ONE WE HAVE THE MOST COMPLETE HISTORIES ON, AND IS CONSIDERED THE SECOND WORST THERE EVER WAS. (THE GENETICS WAR, OR WORLD WAR THREE, KILLED MORE PEOPLE ALL TOGETHER, BU THE RECORDS ARE FRAGMENTARY.) SO I POINTED OUT THAT EVEN IN WORLD WAR TWO, BOTH SIDES HAD SOME AGREEMENTS GOING: A TRUCE FLAG WOULD MAKE THEM STOP SHOOTING AND PARLAY FOR A WHILE, BOTH SIDES LET SWITZERLAND STAY NEUTRAL AND UNTOUCHED SO THEY COULD TALK TRUCE AND SWAP PRISONERS THERE, BOTH BRITAIN AND GERMANY QUIETLY AGREED TO LEAVE EACH OTHERS 'AIR MINITRIES' ALONE EVEN IN THE WORST BOMBING RAIDS, AND SO ON. I WOUND UP BY SAYING THAT EARTH HAS NEVER REALLY HAD WHAT HE WOULD CALL AN UNLIMITED WAR; EVEN THE WICKEDEST GOVERNMENTS ALWAYS LEFT THEMSELVES AN ESCAPE HATCH FOR PEACE, AND PEOPLE BY THEMSELVES ARE ALWAYS AS WILLING TO TALK AS FIGHT, EVEN THE WORST.

WHILE I WAS SAYING ALL THIS, HE GOT TO LOOKING MORE AND MORE POLE-AXED. WHEN I WAS DONE, HE SAT THERE BLINKING FOR A WHILE. HE MUTTERED, 'I HAD NEVER CONSIDERED THAT ASPECT,' AND THEN HE GOT UP AND WANDERED AWAY. I WAS LEFT WONDERING WHAT KIND OF HISTORIES HE'S BEEN READING. DO ALLIANCE PEOPLE TRY TO MAKE THEMSELVES LOOK TEN TIMES AS FIERCE AS THEY REALLY ARE? WHAT'S THE POINT OF THAT? I'D LIKE TO KNOW WHAT SPOCK THINKS OF HUMANS IN GENERAL ... AND US IN PARTICULAR. FOR SOME REASON, I FEEL SORRY FOR HIM.

Kirk strolled quietly out of the turbolife, remembering all the other times he'd been out sick and then returned, being careful to look casual as he sauntered onto the bridge. Spock was the first to notice and turn around, eyebrows raised; then Uhura, with a soft gasp of surprise, then Scott, with an almost-shocked, "Captain!", then all the rest at once. They stared, apparently not knowing what to say. I must look strange, Kirk realized, remembering that his hair was still a bit long. Say something reassuring ... "Well," he grinned, coming up to the command module, "isn't anyone going to welcome me home?"

That was enough. The bridge crew scrambled out of their seats to crowd-around him, offering handshakes and congratulations and welcomes, with slightly-roughened voices and more than a few misted eyes. Kirk endured it happily, thanking everyone, struggling with the lump in his own throat, and more grateful than he could tell them. "Yes, it's good to be back," he heard himself repeat. "Thanks, Sulu. No, I'll be here only part-time for a while yet ... what? Well, when the shift's over, we can all go down to the main rec-room and celebrate properly. Checkov, do you have any of that genuine vodka left?"

"Uh, yes, Sair." Check looked away, blushing. "I hafn't touched it."

"Hm. All right, but until this evening it's business as usual. Back to work, people. Ship's status, Mr. Spock?" He settled into the vacated command chair, delighted with the familiar feel of it, while Spock rattled off lists of facts and numbers.

He scarcely noticed as the turbolift doors opened; it was Spock's abrupt stare and silence that warned him. Kirk turned slowly, already guessing who it must be. Sure enough, Jenneth Roantree was leaning on the rail. "Hi, Jim." She smiled. "Welcome back."

"Hello yourself." Kirk grinned in return, ignoring the rapt silence from the rest of the bridge crew. "What can I do for you, Jen?"

"Hm, a couple of things." Roantree glanced at Uhura, who nodded ever so slightly. Kirk wondered briefly what could be going on between that mismatched pair. "First off, as near as we can figure it, Full Moon Festival is due in another day. We'll have it down in rec room #10, around 7 o'clock. You want to attend?"

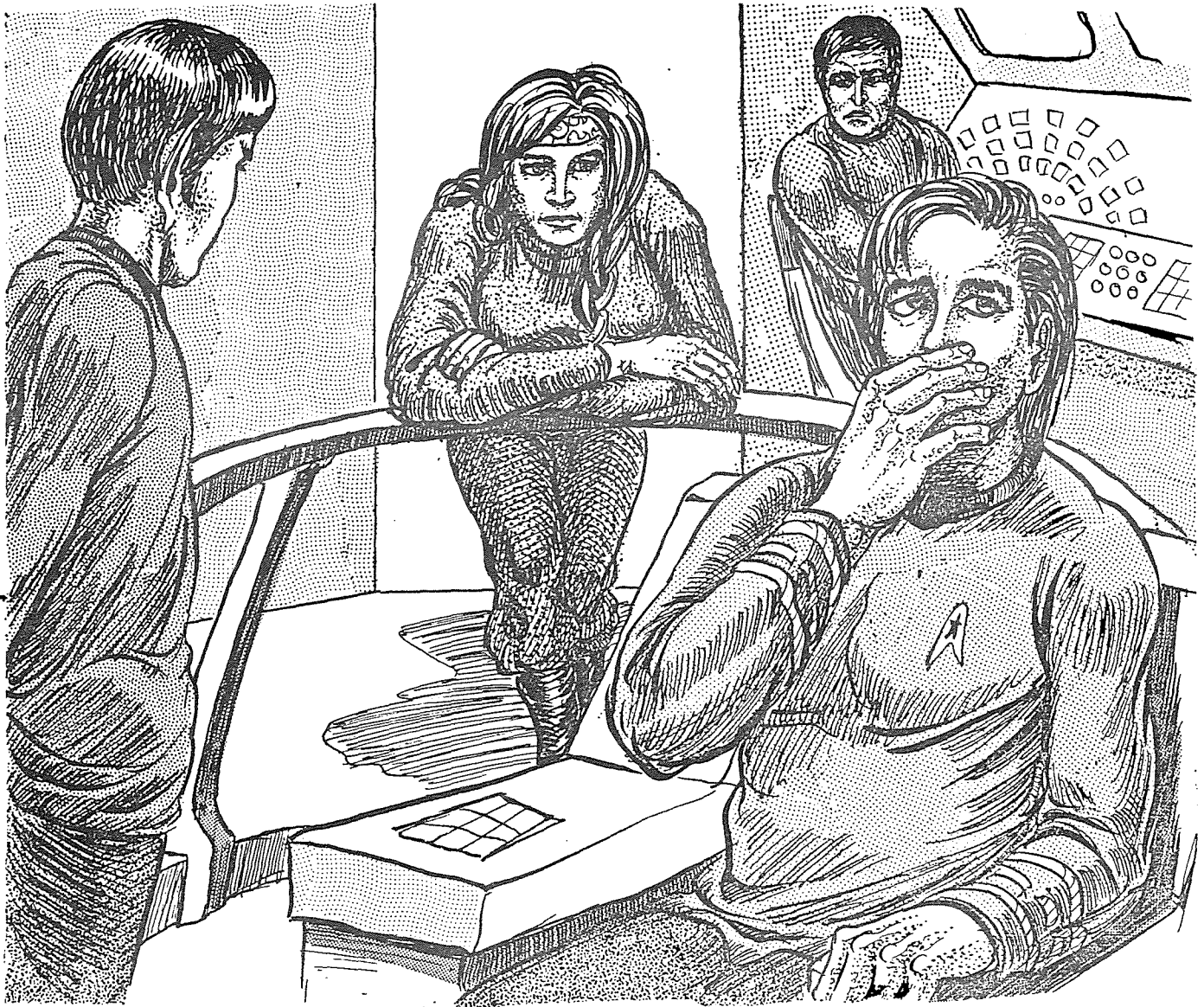
"Sure," Kirk answered at once, remembering what Anarchist celebrations were like. He noticed Spock twitching one hand in a covert signal. "Uhm, can I bring a couple of friends?"

"Just a couple," Roantree conceded, briefly frowning. "Full Moon bashes can get pretty lively, and frankly, some of those anthropologists who've been talking to us are real wet blankets."

"All right, just Dr. McCoy and Spock and myself, then. Will that do?"

Roantree raised her head to look straight at Spock, then smiled. "Sounds fine," she agreed. "The other thing I wanted to ask you about is a good deal more serious. It's about something Quanna discovered in the records -- in fact, we've had a couple complaints about those records." She gave Spock an odd look. "Citizen Spock, we'd like to know why you've voice-locked big chunks of the computer's information."

For an instant there was no sound on the bridge except the soft noises of the machinery. Then Spock stepped forward, answer ready. "There are several logical reasons for these omissions," he began smoothly, "among them being a concern for your people's safety. Some of our knowledge involves hazards which you might not recognize for lack of sufficient background."



Kirk's eyebrows went up on that one. Fortunately, Roantree couldn't see it. Nonetheless, she didn't like that answer. "That's a fancy way of saying that compared to you we're still in grade school," she drawled, showing teeth. "Keep the baby away from the chemistry set. Sure. For your information, we can all read safety-warnings, and we know enough not to tinker

with things we don't understand. I don't know how it is with you Vulcans, but among my people even a five-year-old has enough sense not to touch something it doesn't understand."

"Even so, you would not -- for example -- give a loaded pistol to a five-year-old."

"Huh?" Roantree blinked at him. "What are you talking about? I got my first pistol when I was five -- and killed my first man the next day. Boy, rather: I don't think he was more than 13."

Again there was silence on the bridge, save for a faintly audible gasp from Kirk. Spock blinked several times before answering. "That is ... an excellent illustration of my point. Small children with deadly weapons are quite prone to fatal accidents."

"'Accident', my butt!" Roantree snapped. "It was damn well deliberate. Dad made me practice for days beforehand, made sure I could shoot fast and straight with that little pistol. A good clean shot it was too: exactly between the eyes. Dad was real proud of me."

"Jesus ..." Kirk whispered, rubbing his forehead. My father would never -- Hers, dammit! Not mine ...

"Your father ..." Spock was blinking rapidly again. "... trained you for ... assassination?"

"Damn right. And why not? The little whoreson thief deserved it. My first week tending the geese, and he stole two of them -- and beat me up as well, and him three times my size. Everyone else was busy with spring planting, so it fell to me to see to it that he didn't do that again." Roantree glanced around her at the ill-disguised shock on so many faces, and frowned with impatience. "Look, he was a raider from one of the Luddite towns. No way could we go demand reparations from them; they'd shoot us on sight if we crossed their borders. The only way to keep the robber from coming back was to shoot him, which is exactly what I did."

"Begod," Scott cut in, "ye killed a lad o' 13 for stealin' two geese?"

"And ~~for breaking my arm~~," Roantree added. "Besides, it'd been a very lean winter, and every bit of food was precious. Do you know how many meals you can get off two geese? Enough to make the difference between surviving and starving! Dammit, why do you think that stealing food in famine-time is a killing offense?" She threw a challenging glare around the bridge. Nobody answered her. She smiled coldly. "Of course, I don't suppose that any of you have had experience with the ethics of famine."

"I have," Kirk admitted, drawing several startled looks. "All right, Jen. You've made your point. Nobody's blaming you for --" Being a five-year-old murderer! " -- defending your livelihood."

"Fine." Roantree shrugged and turned back to Spock. "So much for gun-toting children. Now will you take the blocks off the computer?"

"Uhh ..." said Spock, speechless for once.

"We cannot do that," Scott cut in unexpectedly. "'Tis for oor own safety, too. We've got oor share o' hostile neighbors, ye know, an' there's some things that wouldna be well for us if they knew. An accidental word here an' there could do considerable harm if it got back ta, say, the Romulans. Ye remember them, don't ye?"

Spock glanced at him in visible surprise -- and gratitude.

"Uhm," Roantree looked a little bewildered. "'Loose lips sink ships,' and like that ... but aren't the chances of that a bit remote? Even if all those gaps in the record cover things an enemy could use, we're well within friendly territory and safe inside your ship. Whom could we tell it to? Don't you think you're taking your safety precautions a little too far?"

"Weel now ... er ..." Scott fizzled out.

"Ah, there's another reason!" Kirk rescued him, riding on a good guess. "We can't just give all our information away, Jenneth; we're supposed to sell it."

"What?" said Roantree, not seeing Scott's jaw drop, or Spock's eyebrows climb to his bangs. "You mean you're sort of a

"Right. Those are some of the things we do. How do you think Starfleet makes its, uh, living?"

"Trade!" Roantree snapped her fingers. "Why, of course! I always wondered how a ship this elaborate could pay for itself... Not just transport and defense, but research and education, too! Hmmm, looks like you've got one hell of a good job here, Jim."

"It's a hell of a job, all right." Kirk's smile was a bit strained.

"I don't mean to sound greedy," Roantree nudged, "but ... don't you think we've earned the right to that knowledge? We helped you get back half the galaxy, which is a considerable piece of real estate -- and what are land prices like these days?"

"Look, I'd be happy to oblige," Kirk scrambled, "but some of the information isn't mine to give. It belongs to Starfleet in general, and I can't give it away without everybody's agreement. You understand that, don't you?"

Roantree scratched her head, but nodded. "How long will it take your Co-op to meet, discuss, and agree?" she asked.

"I can't say exactly, but we ought to have some sort of answer by the time we reach Starbase 12."

"That long?" Roantree sighed. "Oh well, I suppose we can study the rest of the info until then. There's plenty." She stepped away from the rail. "Want to come down to our deck for lunch?"

"Sure thing," Kirk promised, busy with another idea.

Roantree waved acknowledgement and trotted off into the turbolift. The minute she was gone, everyone on the bridge except Spock burst into cheers and applause. Kirk grinned, stood up, and took a bow. Everyone but Spock laughed for a long moment, then turned back to work. Kirk quietly waved Spock closed.

"Mr. Spock," he said, keeping his voice down, "your memory-blocks on the computer don't seem to have been very subtle."

"I appear to have underestimated the perceptivity of our guests," Spock admitted. "It shall not happen again."

"Let's hope not," Kirk sighed. "Now get me a list of the inhabited worlds that we'll pass within scanning range during lunchtime. I'm going to run that attitude-test as soon as I see our friends again."

"We will pass Halka, well within scanning range, between 1249 and 1326."

"Halka? ... Yes, that should do very nicely ... " Kirk leaned his chin on his hand and abstractly watched the viewscreen.

Spock went back to his accustomed place at the Science console, but he spent the rest of the morning watching Kirk more than his board.

Stardate 5919.6, Spock to McCoy:

THE CAPTAIN PLANS SOME ATTEMPT AT LUNCH TO RECONCILE THE ANARCHISTS TO THE PRESENCE OF GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS WITHIN THE FEDERATION. HE HAS NOT REVEALED THE EXACT NATURE OF HIS PLANS TO ME. I CANNOT CALCULATE HIS PROBABILITIES OF SUCCESS, BUT SINCE HE MEANS TO DEAL WITH THEM ALONE, I CONSIDER THIS ACTIVITY HIGHLY DANGEROUS. I SHALL WAIT OUTSIDE THE DOOR IN CASE HE HAS NEED OF ASSISTANCE.

Stardate 5919.6, McCoy to Spock:

COOL OFF, SPOCK. AFTER 6 MONTHS WITH THESE PEOPLE, HE KNOWS WHAT HE'S DOING. THE DANGER IS MINIMAL; QUIT BREATHING DOWN HIS NECK. WHY THE HELL ARE YOU TAPING ALL THESE MESSAGES, ANYWAY? THE INTERCOM'S WORKING FINE AND THE ANARCHISTS DON'T CONTROL IT ANYMORE.

Stardate 5919.6, Personal Security Code, Spock to McCoy:

I HAVE DISCOVERED THAT OUR INTERSHIP COMMUNICATIONS MAY, NONETHELESS, NOT BE SECURE. ONE OF THE COMMUNICATIONS OFFICERS, ACCORDING TO THE ANARCHISTS, HAS BEEN STRONGLY ATTEMPTING TO PERSUADE THEM TO JOIN STAR FLEET; THIS IS CONTRARY TO OUR CURRENT POLICY, AND SHOWS DANGEROUS PERSONAL INVOLVEMENT.

Stardate 5919.6, McCoy to Spock:

SURE 'ONE OF THE COMMUNICATIONS OFFICERS' HAS BEEN TRYING TO SELL THEM ON THAT IDEA. SHE'S GOT THEM DROOLING OVER IT, IN FACT. WHAT'S WRONG WITH THAT? SHE'S DOING A BETTER JOB OF RECONCILING OUR FRIENDS TO THIS BRAVE NEW UNIVERSE THAN ALL YOUR SOCIAL SCIENCE TEAMS PUT TOGETHER.

Stardate 5919.6, Personal Security Code, Top Priority, Spock to McCoy:

MAY I REMIND YOU, DOCTOR, THAT THESE PEOPLE ARE LAWLESS, VIOLENT, EMOTIONALLY UNRESTRAINED AND ABYSMALLY IGNORANT CONCERNING THEIR TRUE POSITION. THERE IS NO POSSIBILITY THAT THEY CAN EVER JOIN STAR FLEET WITHOUT MASSIVE PSYCHOLOGICAL REHABILITATION. ENCOURAGING THEM TO SEEK INFORMATION CONCERNING STAR FLEET MAY LEAD TO A BREACH OF SECURITY, REVEALING SEVERAL TRUTHS WHICH THEY WILL DOUBTLESS FIND EXTREMELY UNPLEASANT. TO WIT: A) STAR FLEET IS A MILITARY EXTENSION OF A GOVERNMENTAL BODY, SUBJECT TO THE LAWS THEREOF; B) THE ENTIRE KNOWN GALAXY, INCLUDING THE FEDERATION, IS ADMINISTERED BY VARIOUS INTERPLANETARY GOVERNMENTAL INSTITUTIONS; C) THERE ARE NO LIFE-ROLES AWAITING THE ANARCHISTS, ON EARTH OR ANYWHERE ELSE. DISCOVERY OF THESE FACTS MAY IMPEL THE ANARCHISTS TO VIOLENCE, MOST PROBABLY AIMED AT THE CAPTAIN. I FIND THIS SUFFICIENT REASON TO SEVERELY REPRIMAND THE OFFICER RESPONSIBLE, AND TO ORDER HER TO REFRAIN FROM SUCH ACTIVITY IN THE FUTURE. EITHER TELL HER THAT YOURSELF OR REVEAL HER IDENTITY TO ME SO THAT I CAN DO IT.

McCoy to Spock:

I'LL TELL HER THAT. I'LL TELL HER EXACTLY WHAT I THINK OF YOUR ATTITUDE, TOO. WILL YOU TELL THE CAPTAIN WHAT YOU THINK OF HIS ATTEMPTS TO REASON WITH THE ANARCHISTS? I DOUBT IT! MAY I REMIND YOU, YOU PRISSY POINTY-EARED PARANOID, THAT HER BUSINESS IS COMMUNICATIONS -- AND SHE'S DOING A DAMN GOOD JOB OF IT. BETTER THAN YOU AND YOURS COULD DO! I SEE PROFESSIONAL JEALOUSY RAISING ITS HEAD. YOU CAN TELL JIM I SAID SO. FURTHERMORE, YOU CAN TAKE THIS TAPE AND SHOVE IT WHERE THE SUN DON'T SHINE.

Lunch with the Anarchists was quiet and relaxed. Kirk sat between Roantree and Quannechota, appreciating Quanna's presence as well as the food. They exchanged smiles over every other bite, and the Anarchists politely turned their conversation elsewhere. Kirk eventually glanced at his chronometer, judged the the timing was right, and tapped Roantree's shoulder for attention.

"This pie is wonderful," he opened, pointing his fork at the actually-very-good reconstructed dessert. "You know, you could earn a nice sum by selling the recipe to ship's cooks."

"No kidding?" And Bailey sat up, almost preening. "There are plenty of other recipes where that one came from."

"So much the better," Kirk enthused over the last mouthful of synthetic blueberries.

"Write 'The Spaceman's Guide to Synthetic Cooking', and get rich selling it." *Hell, they could!*

"Title's too long," Jean Battre-le-Diable considered. "Maybe, 'The Computerized Cookbook'?"

" -- 'and Drinkbook'," Hot-Trot added.

"Mechanized Meals!" other voices suggested. "'Spacefood With Style!'" "The Galley Gourmet!" Clearly everyone liked the idea. Kirk glanced at his chronometer again and wondered how soon he could get to the next step.

Roantree did it for him. "This is one hell of an improvement," she commented. "Back home, people wanted to hang us for our knowledge. Here, they want to pay us for it."

"It will be most pleasant," Quannechota added, "To live in a universe where knowledge is a valuable trade item. I assume that there is a complex economy of knowledge-exchange; perhaps we shall require much time to learn its patterns."

... perfect set-up. "Well, I'll give you whatever help I can," Kirk offered. "Markets, trade-routes ... Hmm, where to begin?" He pretended to ponder the problem. "Ah, turn on that viewer and set it to scan immediate space. I've travelled these routes fairly often and can probably tell you a lot about the first planet we see."

He held his breath while Quannachota obligingly punched buttons. Sure enough, the blue-green hulk of Halka appeared on the screen. "Oh, that one. Lovely place," Kirk began, picking his words with vast care. "Technology's very advanced, but they keep their industry light. They sell us a lot of dilithium, but we have to do the mining ourselves. They also produce some of the best arts and crafts in the galaxy -- " Pour it on!

Kirk was justly famous as one of the best bluffers in the galaxy, and that skill required a great talent for yarn-spinning. His Celtic ancestors would have been proud of him. Harry Mudd would have been impressed. The Anarchists listened with wide eyes and rapturous expressions while Kirk waxed poetic over the glories of Halkan culture. After about ten minutes of this he judged that they were sufficiently prepared, and he quietly dropped the bomb. " -- we had the damndest time persuading their ruling council to sell us the dilithium. They -- "

"Huhh?" Every Anarchist in the room grunted, blinked, or otherwise reacted as if punched in the gut.

Oh-oh. " -- were afraid it might be used to power some warship for 'aggressive purposes'," Kirk hurried on, sweating. "To convince them that we didn't like war any better than they did, we had to give them almost all our history texts to study. They took a long -- "

"Their what council?" Roantree cut in.

"Sounded like 'ruling' to me," said Bailey.

"That's what they call it," Kirk admitted. Easy ... little by little ... "I think it's some sort of traditional title, a -- a relic from their past. I don't know exactly what their job is, but they were the ones we had to talk to about trading for dilithium."

The Anarchists traded shocked glances. "Could the name be a mistake?" Roantree asked. "Couldn't they really have been the owners of the land the dilithium was under? Or the planet's mining experts? Or the trade-shippers?"

"I don't think so," Kirk admitted. ... another crumb of truth ... like mixing explosives ... drop by drop ...

"They said 'ruling'; they meant 'ruling'," growled Bailey. "Those 'universal translators' don't make mistakes."

"True," Quannachota confirmed. "They translate electrical patterns of verbal concepts in the speech centers of the brain. Whatever the native word may be, 'ruling' is the accurate concept."

"Could it have been a joke?" Roantree didn't sound very convinced. "Something like 'The Royal Order of Moose Moles-ters'?"

"It'd be crazy to play a joke like that at a serious trade conference," said Jean Battre-le-Diable. "It makes as much sense as tripping a prospective cattle-buyer into a manure pile."

"Maybe the word was so ancient it'd lost its meaning," Roantree made one last try. "Sort of like that town they still call 'King's Port'."

"Not bloody likely," sneered Hot-Trot. "The Russians, even before the Collapse, didn't keep the name of 'Stalingrad'."

... must tell that one to Chekov sometime ... Kirk thought, feeling the silence settle like lead over the rec room. "Why is everyone staring at me?"

"Jim," Roantree sighed, "don't you realize you were talking to a bunch of tyrants?"

"Huh?!" This time his reaction was genuine. "Tyrants? Them?! That bunch of gentle old men?!? You've got to be kidding! Good god, Jenneth, they're pacifists! How the hell could they -- "

"Pacifism doesn't prevent a damn thing," retorted Bailey. "It can be used to make people give up all idea of overthrowing their masters. Light knows, that's been done before."

"But those people -- They're all healthy and prosperous and creative and happy! If they were living under a tyranny--"

"Fat, happy slaves are still slaves, Jim." Guannechota's voice held a faint but unmistakable note of pity. "The worst and most effective form of tyranny is invisible to its subjects."

"'Invisible' is hardly the word for it! The Halkan council is nothing like the kind of -- governments you've read about in your history books. From what I've seen, their rule must be so mild, so downright minimal -- "

"That's like being a 'little bit pregnant'," Bailey snorted.



"Or having a 'teensy-weensy cancer'," Roantree concurred, thoughtfully rubbing her shoulder. "Either it's there or it isn't; and if it's there, it grows."

"No matter how light the chains, all those happy and healthy and wealthy people are still slaves." Battre-le-diable shook his head and buried his moustache in his beer-mug.

Kirk rubbed the bridge of his nose and softly recited several choice obscenities. The Anarchists gave him sympathetic looks, assuming he was kicking himself for being a prize-winning idiot. Quannechota reassuringly patted his arm, her mind busy elsewhere. Does the rest of the Alliance know the truth about Halka? she wondered. Impossible, or they wuld not trade there ... yet they traded with the cloud-masters of Ardana ... of course, that was an emergency ... How much of this dealing is ignorance, desperation, or corruption? She put the thought aside as Kirk ran glum fingers through her hair. "Shall we retire to your room, my love?" she murmured in his ear.

Kirk sighed and pulled himself back to business. "Not so soon after a heavy meal," he replied, managing to smile lecherously. "Give me an hour to rest, and then come one up." He kissed her, got to his feet, bid the usual farewells to all those damnably sympathetic faces, and walked out as quickly as politeness permitted.

Spock was waiting in the corridor and fell into step beside him, but waited until they were alone in the turbolift to ask: "Were you successful, Captain?"

"Absolutely not, Mr. Spock." Kirk grimly studied the floor. "Thy won't budge on that point. Not by a hair."

"Did you discuss their personal futures with them?"

"No. Too busy on that first point."

"I assume the experience was ... unpleasant?"

"Like swatting open a pinata full of stale eels." The turbolift stopped before Spock could react to that one. "I'm going to follow McCoy's orders and get some rest. After that ... " He paused at the doorway to give Spock a weary grin. "Top priority to Option #4."

Stardate 5919.8, Personal Log, Kirk recording:

QUANNA LOOKS SO BEAUTIFUL WHEN SHE'S ASLEEP ... ALL EBONY AND GOLD AGAINST THE SHEETS. OH, I WISH I COULD WRITE POETRY, OR SING LIKE JENNETH, OR FIND THE RIGHT WORDS TO TELL QUANNA HOW BEAUTIFUL SHE IS, HOW GOOD IT IS WITH HER ...

I CAN'T GIVE HER UP. I WON'T GIVE HER UP. WHATEVER THE REST OF JENNETH'S PEOPLE DO, QUANNA'S STAYING WITH ME. ... BUT JUST WHAT WILL I DO WITH HER? ... AH, OUT OF BED, I MEAN ... I CAN'T SEE MYSELF LEAVING STARFLEET, SETTLING ON A PLANET SOMEWHERE, DOING ANY OTHER JOB ... AND QUANNA'S A BORN SPACER, TOO. I COULDN'T JUST LEAVE HER AROUND SOMEWHERE BETWEEN SHORE LEAVES.

WAIT A MINUTE, I THINK THERE'S A WAY. LEGAL LOOPHOLE: CALL HER AN 'EXPLORATION SUPERNUMERARY' -- FANCY TERM FOR WHAT THEY USED TO CALL AN ARMY SCOUT -- AND I CAN KEEP HER ON THE SHIP WITH ME. YES, YES, WE CAN EXPLORE THE WHOLE GALAXY TOGETHER! IT SHOULDN'T BE TOO HARD TO CONVINCE HER OR THE BRASS; NOT AS IF SHE WERE ACTUALLY JOINING THE FLEET, JUST 'ATTACHED' TO THE SHIP UNDER NOBODY'S COMMAND BUT MINE. THAT WAY SHE COULD GET USED TO STARFLEET BY SLOW, EASY STEPS. YES, I CAN DO IT. THEY OWE ME THAT MUCH, AT LEAST.

DAMN. I FORGOT ABOUT THE CREW'S PARTY TONIGHT. HAVE TO GET DRESSED AGAIN. DAMN.

"What exactly are we supposed to do, Jim?" McCoy tried not to sound anxious as he picked his way through the dim-lit shifting patterns of bodies and pillows. Already this looked very different from the bash the crew had held for Jim the night before. Helluva party, but I think this is going to pale it ...

"I'm not sure of all the details," Kirk admitted, sidestepping a circle of dancers, "but the first thing we do is stake

out some territory. Then one of us gets drinks for the rest of us."

"I'll volunteer for that part. Judging from the lively crowd around the wall-table, the refreshments must be pretty good. Besides, if you let Spock do the catering, you'll get nothing but lemonade."

Spock chose to ignore the bait; bantering with McCoy was far less important than studying the Anarchists in something like their natural setting. He kept an observant eye and ear on the crowd as he picked out a moderately unoccupied section of floor by the offhand wall. "What is the procedure," he asked Kirk, "for 'staking out' a territory?"

"Collect some pillows and sit down," said Kirk, doing precisely that. "I't also polite to sprawl. Ahh, there. Just fetch the drinks, Bones; don't get too caught up in talking to the women, or you'll never get back."

Bones made a face at him and ambled off to the crowded table.

Spock settled himself carefully on the pillows and duly observed the behavior of the natives. He fleetingly wished he could have brought a tricorder with him. He wished he could have brought a small stun-phaser, for that matter; the celebration was patternless, chaotic, noisy, fiercely emotional, and thick with undertones of violence and hostility. Besides the thick crowd overdosing alcohol at the serving table, there were several knots of celebrants sprawled here and there, gossiping nastily, joking crudely, puffing suspicious-smelling pipes. In the middle of the room, a ragged circle of dancers was stamping through a simple but forceful pattern that suggested a war-dance. The musicians appeared to be inebriated. The words of the song were barely audible over the clamor of the instruments, but Spock found their meanings disquieting.

You're probably wondering why I'm here
And so am I. So am I! ...
Just as much as you wonder 'bout me being in this place (Yeah!)
That's just how much I marvel at the lameness on your face ...

"Jim," he couldn't help asking, "don't you find that song somewhat hostile?"

"Mocking", to be accurate," Kirk replied, not overly concerned. "Don't worry; it's not aimed at us."

Spray your hair and think you're neat
I think your life is incomplete,
But maybe that's not for me to say;
They only pay me here to play ...

"At whom is it aimed, then?" Spock puzzled, peering at the musicians to see if they were looking at his direction.

Just as much as you wonder 'about me staring back at you,
That's just how much I question the corny thing you do ...

"I think it's aimed at Earth society in general, at least what they know of it." Kirk shifted on the pillows. "Don't take it too seriously, Spock. They're just blowing off steam."

"I hope that this 'blowing off' activity consists of nothing worse than mocking songs."

"Maybe some drunken jokes, too. That's all."

Just as much as you wonder if I mean just what I say,
That's just how much I question the social games you play ...

"Perhaps they are ridiculing the Social Science teams who have been trying to teach them Federation values -- with such little success."

Plastic boots and plastic hats,

And you think you know where it's at!

"Most likely," Kirk agreed.

You're probably wondering why I'm here ...
Not that it makes a heckuva lotta difference to ya.

"I would suggest, Captain, that you order all ship's personnel to refrain from any further attempts at acclimatization. It appears to have done more harm than good."

"No, I wouldn't exactly say that ... "

"Here y'are, Jim," announced McCoy, approaching with three large glasses. "Bourbon and soda for you, a pretty passable mint julep for me, and some plain soda for Spock. They didn't have any lemonade." He settled on the pillows to Kirk's other side. "Clever folks, these; it seems that they finagled the social teams into getting them the booze. Cheers!"

"There, Spock," Kirk grinned, taking his glass. "Jenneth's people have learned something valuable already from your teams: how to scrounge free drinks."

"That is hardly a survival skill," Spock sniffed.

"Don't be too sure," chuckled a familiar voice. The three looked up to see Jenneth Roantree approaching. She smiled and sat down beside Spock, gave him a thoughtful look and a polite nod, and turned her attention to Kirk. "Damn fine booze your people have," she said, lifting her own glass -- a tumbler full of ice and bourbon. "Hope you're enjoying the party."

"So far," Kirk admitted. "Where does it go from here?"

"Oh, a little more loosening up, some Lunar songs, more dancing, more unwinding, people saying anything they like and nobody teasing them about it next day ... things like that. You missed the opening prayer, but that just dedicates the festivities to the Goddess. You know: swearing belief in freedom and passion, summoning the lesser form of Holy Madness, and so on. You haven't really missed anything. High time we got back to regular observances. We didn't have much chance on the voyage out; too much to do, too much danger, too tired. We need it now."

Kirk and McCoy looked at each other, trading understanding. "A general community catharsis?" McCoy translated.

"Indeed," Spock commented drily, wishing he had more room for objective study, wishing the disturbing female had not chosen to sit so close to him. "Is it customary at such gatherings to sing songs deprecating particular persons?"

"Oh, the satires? Sure. Everybody gets to air their gripes about everything and everybody else. It clears the air."

"... Musically induced, yet," McCoy muttered. "Wait, there's something about that in the tapes ... "

"You did not find," Spock continued, "that such mockery urges the victim thereof to violence?"

"Hell, no. Why should it? The victims just sing dirty songs right back. Besides, after that comes the run-through of inspirational songs, so people forget any lingering resentments."

"Wait a minute!" McCoy leaned over to Roantree and waved for her attention. "You mentioned that your people, uh, cue certain songs to their deep emotional responses. You mean, at this kind of party people deliberately sing those songs?!"

"Of course." Roantree blinked at him. "Didn't I make that clear enough?"

"What kind of emotional reactions are summoned?" Spock asked stiffly, estimating the number of running steps to the door.

"All kinds." Roantree shrugged. "We always to the Ecstatics, and the Solidarities, but the rest are optional. We sing whatever people want to air their feelings about."

"Who does the singing?" McCoy asked, wondering why the Anarchists would give anyone that kind of psychological power.

"Everybody sings their own, though of course there's always some overlap ... " She raised her head and listened as another musician began playing. "Ah, there's a classic Moon Goddess song now! Hmm, I can guess who's playing. That's a heavy one for sexual ferocity ... " She smiled savagely, eyes growing abstracted and bright, hands patting the song's galloping rhythm on her thighs.

Kirk and McCoy watched her, fascinated, but Spock firmly turned his face away from her and studied the leaping dancers, preferring to study this celebration of illogic from a safe distance. He found the Anarchists' cheerful openness about both sex and graphic descriptions of the barbarous sport of horseback hunting, shot through with cruel symbols of lust.

All should be warned about this high-born Hunting Girl.
She took this simple man's downfall in hand;
I raised the flag that she unfurled.

Spock glanced covertly at Roantree, wondering if he had ever seen an expression like that on Kirk's face. Then he remembered that he had -- and when, and where. He looked away again, quickly.

Boot-leather flashing, spur-necks the size of my thumb,
This high-born hunter had tastes as strange as they come ...
Unbridled passion: I took the bit in my teeth --
Her standing over, me on my knees underneath ...

"Hey, Spock!" McCoy's voice snagged his attention. "You're spilling your drink!"

Spock hastily straightened his glass, noting sourly that he'd spilled nearly half its contents on his boots. He got to his feet and stalked over to the serving table to fetch some paper towels. The Anarchists there subjected him to some ribbing before he could escape, but even that was an odd relief from the strange intensity of Roantree's presence. He returned cautiously, not pleased to find that Quannachota had joined the little group and that Kirk was hugging her shamelessly. McCoy got up and came past Spock, waving his empty glass and saying something about a refill. Spock caught his arm and leaned close.

"Doctor," he almost whispered, "in view of what we have just observed, give me an estimate of the probability that these people could be psychologically reconditioned."

"Huh? You mean -- " McCoy stared at him, keen blue eyes missing nothing. "You think Starfleet plans to send these people to a -- a rehab colony?!"

"It is possible. They certainly cannot remain -- "

"Well you tell Starfleet for me that it won't work! Never mind that they don't in all the wide galaxy deserve it; it just plain wouldn't work. They've got their personal and social values deliberately linked to deep emotional responses -- and on automatic control -- with those damn songs. They've carefully conditioned a whole interlocked system of values into the bedrock of their personalities. You know what that means? Roantree said they had 'a song for every purpose'; that means dozens, maybe hundreds, of those deepset emotional cues. And they vary for each individual! The best psychologist in the galaxy couldn't root them all out."

"Why not? With proper analysis -- "

"Dammit, Spock, you'd have the devil's own time even cataloguing each person's songs -- even if you had that person's conscious help, which is damned unlikely -- because they don't consciously remember all their own songs! Didn't you see, just now, how that song caught Jenneth by surprise? You'd invariably miss something. Since each song has a place in the

network, if you left one cue-song intact, it could possibly reconstruct the entire network. It's like a plant that spreads by creeper, as well as by seeds; leave one runner alive and you'll have the whole plant back next spring."

"Deep psychotricorder probing could uncover all the cues, in time. I see no reason to believe that the cues could not then be deactivated, at least erased from conscious recall."

"That won't do a damn bit of good! Can't you understand that the songs and their effects are rooted too deep? My lord, some of those things can kill! You couldn't root them out without killing the patient. As for just blanking the songs from conscious memory, it wouldn't last. Sooner or later, they'd here one of their songs again, by accident probably, and they'd remember -- remember everything. And how well do you think they'll like us for making them forget? Sure, give these people surface personalities of nice, acceptable, 'civilized' types -- if you can. Sure. And sooner or later they'll kick those deep responses awake again. It's a hopeless task, Spock. You can tell Starfleet that for me."

McCoy pulled away from Spock's grip and stomped off towards the serving table. Spock sighed, watching him go. There was nothing to do but return to the little group near the wall. Once there, he would have to interact with those two upsetting females; Spock ~~didn't~~ know which of them would be more difficult to deal with.

Another song started, and again Roantree reacted. She scrambled to her feet, grabbing Kirk's hand and pulled him up too. At this distance Spock couldn't hear what she said to him, but Kirk listened, grinned, nodded acquiescence and went with her to join the circle of dancers. Jim, no! They're dangerous! Dismayed, Spock tried to intercept them but was held up by the crowd. He turned to look for McCoy, but couldn't find him in the mob around the table. There was only one possible quarter left to appeal to for help. He went back to the little encampment of pillows where Quannachota was holding the territory alone.

Let's drink a toast to the Admiral, and here's to the Captain bold;
And glory more more for the Commodore when the deeds of might are told.
They stand to the deck in the battle's wreck, when the great shells roar and pound,
And never they fear when the foe is near to lay their orders down ...

Spock paused, startled by the words. This, from Anarchists? The tone sounds mocking. Have they discovered ... ? But as he listened, the song swung into its chorus and the mood changed.

... But off with your hats and three-time-three for every sailor son;
For the men below, who fight the foe: the men behind the gun --
Oh, the men behind the guns!

All the dancers' voices -- including Kirk's and Roantree's -- joined in on the repeated last line. Spock reconsidered the song's meaning; that last line had resembled both a cheer and an incantation. Kirk appeared to agree totally with the sentiments; he was as bright-eyed and jubilant as the Anarchists -- and dancing just as well. He didn't seem to be in any immediate danger. In fact, he seemed to be quite at home among the savage dancers -- and enjoying himself tremendously.

Their hearts are pounding heavy when they swing to port once more.
With never enough of the greenback stuff they start their leave ashore.
You'd think perhaps the blue-shirt chaps had better clothes to wear,
For the uniforms of the officers could hardly be compared.
Warriors bold with straps of gold that dazzle like the sun
Outshine the common sailor lads, the men who serve the gun --
Oh, the men behind the gun!

Spock decided that the song was no threat and implied no breach of security; it was simply one more traditional 'song of power', and shockingly insubordinate in the usual fashion of the Anarchists. The only danger was that Kirk seemed to be enjoying it without qualms. His eyes were gleaming, his expression fierce and joyful and dedicated. Roantree was dancing beside him, looking exactly the same. Spock sat down on the cushions and considered the phenomenon. It occurred to him that his earlier assumption might have been wrong; different cultures or no, their personalities were very much alike. If she could ever accept the idea of Starfleet, Jenneth Roantree might make a very good starship captain. He could almost

picture her in command of the Enterprise, seeing her from the Sciences console as he so often saw Kirk: the same face, same changeable-colored eyes, same cheerful-mischievous smile, same fascinating and brilliant and unpredictable mind underneath

-- possible --

"I do not understand you sexual customs," said a familar, unwelcome voice beside him. Spock flinched, and turned to meet Quannechota's inscrutable dark eyes. "As soon as Jim was well enough to resume work," she said, "he took me back into his bed. Why has he not also taken you whom he dearly loves?"

But say not a word 'til the shot is hear that tells the fight is on,
And the angry sound of another round says they must be gone
Over the deep and deadly sweep of fire and bursting shell,
Where the very air is a mad despair, the throes of a living hell;
But down in the deep of the night ship, unseen by the midday sun,
You'll find the boys who make the noise: the men behind the gun ...

"You are his wife," Spock snapped. "His form of marriage is sexually exclusive to all but you. Besides, I am a Vulcan. What ... you are suggesting is totally impossible."

"Nonsense," said Quannechota. "I have observed you watching him. Your feelings varied from protectiveness to outright jealousy, and just now included unmistakable desire."

"You are totally mistaken!" Control! Anger serves no logical purpose. "I-am-a-Vulcan-and-I-am-in-control-of-my-emotions. I showed no such expression. You are projecting your own fantasies."

"I am not speaking of your facial rigidity," Quannechota replied, tightening her shoulders. "You forget that there appears to be a telepathic compatability between us, little though either of us likes it. I observed your feelings just now, Citizen, and I recognized them for what they were."

Control! Control! "I was not looking at Jim!" Wrong argument! "My feelings are my concern, and are not open to discussion. Telepathic invasion, however, is another matter entirely. On my world, reading another's mind without consent is a serious crime -- a great offense against custom, punishable by ... the equivalent of exile among your people."

"Then exile yourself, Citizen. I did not voluntarily read your mind. On the contrary, you were transmitting so strongly that I could not block you out."

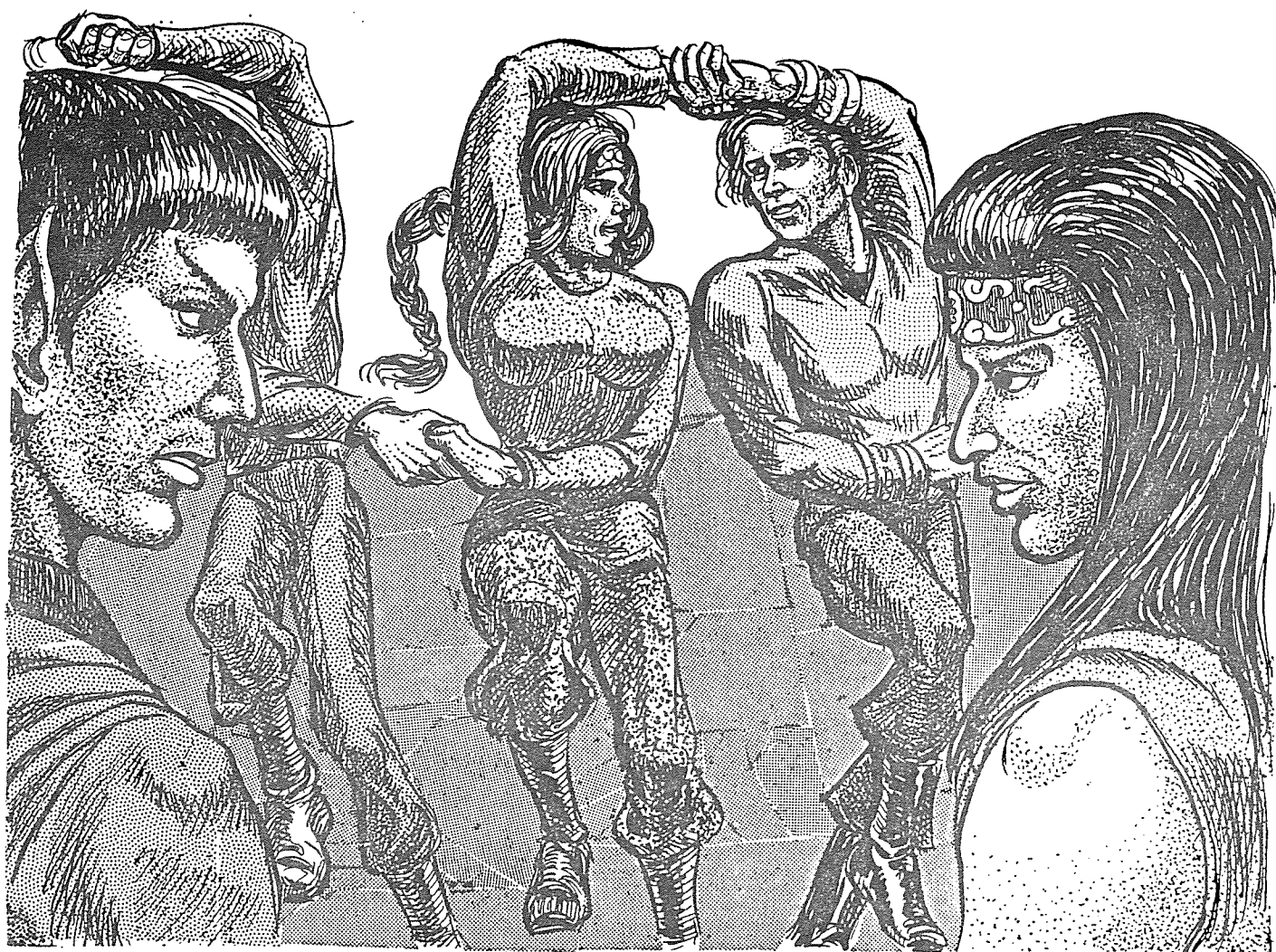
"I was not! -- not referring to this incident, but to your behavior in Sickbay eleven days ago. You compelled me to undergo your bizarre treatment along with Jim."

"The Rite of Saturn was as necessary as it was effective, and therefore unavoidable. I assure you that I did not enjoy contact with you, either, and you will recall that I did instruct you to guard yourself."

"Shield. The proper term is 'shield'. You misinformed me."

"You quibble. My meaning was plain. If you could not disentangle yourself from the effect, that is unfortunate -- but it was no fault of mine."

And well they know the cyclone-blow loosed from the cannon-steel,
And they know the hull of the enemy ship will quiver with the feel,
And the decks will rock with the lightning-shock and shake with a great recoil,
While the sea grows red with the blood of the dead, and swallows up her spoil;
But not until the final ship has made her final run
Can we give their rest to the very best -- the men behind the gun ...
Oh, the men behind the guns!



"Spock," cut in another voice, "what the hell do you make of that song?" It was McCoy, approaching with a reloaded glass. Spock was infinitely relieved to see him, especially since Quannechota moved away to make room on the pillows.

"It strikes me as barbarously bloodthirsty, divisive and inflammatory," Spock decreed. McCoy's startled expression made him realize he'd put it the wrong way.

Quannechota gave him a quietly baleful look and turned away.

"I was just going to say," McCoy commented, looking oddly at Spock, "that Jim seems to be enjoying it quite a bit."

"The Captain has a certain romantic attachment to old sea ballads."

"Not like that one. I don't know if this shows a change of character, or if he's picking it up from Jenneth."

"It is a song of great personal meaning to the Co-ordinator," Quannechota disclosed. "She adopted it when she first took that occupation."

"Oho! One of those!" McCoy pounced. "It must be the mental contact, then."

"Doctor," Spock cut in, noticing a winking tell-tale light on the wall, "I believe someone is trying to contact us."

"You deal with it, Spock. I'm busy. Quanna, can you tell me just how those songs are 'adopted'? I mean, what's the procedure..."

Spock got up and went to the wall-communicator, grateful for the chance to get out of Quannechota's presence. He flicked the contact open. "Spock here."

"Message to Captain Kirk from Starfleet. Rrrrr," M'Ress purred at the other end of the line.

"One moment." Spock went to the horde of dancers, suspicious of M'Ress but pleased that the call had come, and pulled Kirk out of a laughing, back-pounding embrace with Roantree. Kirk sighed and rolled his eyes at the intrusion, but made his excuses and dutifully went to the wall-outlet. Spock hovered nearby, too far to hear the conversation, but close enough to see first the surprise and then the beatific smile that spread across Kirk's face.

Kirk shut off the speaker and turned, still grinning to Spock. "We've just won the first round of Option 4," he whispered. Then he went straight to the middle of the rec room and bellowed for silence. "People," he announced, "I just received a call from Star Fleet. They've agreed to give you a ship!"

"What?!" yelled several astonished voices, including McCoy's.

"A ship! They're giving you a ship of your own! It'll be waiting for you when you get to Starbase 12!"

There was an instant's silence, and then the cheers began. A small mob of Anarchists took turns hugging Kirk. Another bunch hoisted Roantree onto their shoulders. Impromptu dances and toasts broke out. The noise was deafening.

'Step one, Option 4,' Spock repeated to himself, allowing one corner of his mouth to twitch into the ghost of a smile. The probabilities in favor of success had just improved considerably. Send them away, he mused, to the Rim or to the Center, or the other side of the galaxy. Leave them there. Leave them, and never have to think of them again.

"How soon now?" asked that quiet, hated voice again. Spock refused to look as Quannechota stepped up beside him. "How soon will we know if Starfleet has agreed to open the computer's total knowledge to us?"

"I don't know," he said. He turned away from her and walked as quickly as he dared to the door.

Stardate 5921.9, Personal Log, Spock recording:

I AM COMPLETELY ISOLATED, AND I CAN NO LONGER TRUST MYSELF.

WHETHER RESULTING FROM THE CONVERGENCE OR FROM MENTAL AND SOCIAL CONTACT WITH THE ANARCHISTS, MOST OF THE OFFICERS ON THE SHIP HAVE BECOME PERSONALLY INVOLVED AND SENTIMENTALLY INCLINED TOWARD THE VISITORS, TO THE POINT WHERE DISCIPLINE IS IN DANGER OF COLLAPSE. THIS DETERIORATION HAS ACCELERATED, IF ANYTHING, AS WE APPROACH STARBASE 12. DR. MCCOY IS OPENLY SYMPATHETIC TO THE ANARCHISTS, FREELY GIVES THEM ALL THE TECHNICAL DATA THEY ASK FOR AND REFUSES TO SEE THEIR PRESENCE AS A PSYCHOLOGICAL DANGER TO THE CREW. ONE OF THE COMMUNICATIONS OFFICERS -- PROBABLY LT. M'RESS, WHO ADMITS TO 'LIKING' THEM -- IS OPENLY INFLUENCING THE ANARCHISTS TO JOIN STARFLEET; THE CAPTAIN HAS EFFECTIVELY PREVENTED ME FROM ORDERING THE CULPRIT TO DESIST. NURSE CHAPEL POINTEDLY TELLS ME THAT I AM 'WORRYING TOO MUCH'. MR. SCOTT SHOWS AN IRRATIONAL PREOCCUPATION WITH THE ANARCHIST CHIEF MECHANIC AND PERSISTS IN GIVING HER ANY TECHNICAL INFORMATION SHE REQUESTS, EVEN WHEN SUCH INFORMATION BORDERS DANGEROUSLY ON RESTRICTED AREAS. JIM IS LIKEWISE OBSESSED WITH QUANNECHOTA, AND REFUSES TO SEE ANY PROBLEM IN THE GROWING LAXITY OF DISCIPLINE. NONE OF THE OTHER OFFICERS SEE THE DANGER OF THIS SITUATION, NOR CAN I PERSUADE THEM OTHERWISE. EVEN STARFLEET COMMAND, IN ONE OF ITS RARE REPLIES TO MY REPORTS, HAS ADVISED ME TO 'AVOID UNDUE ALARM'. NO ONE SEEMS TO UNDERSTAND THE GRAVITY OF THIS SITUATION! AM I THE ONLY ONE UNAFFECTED?

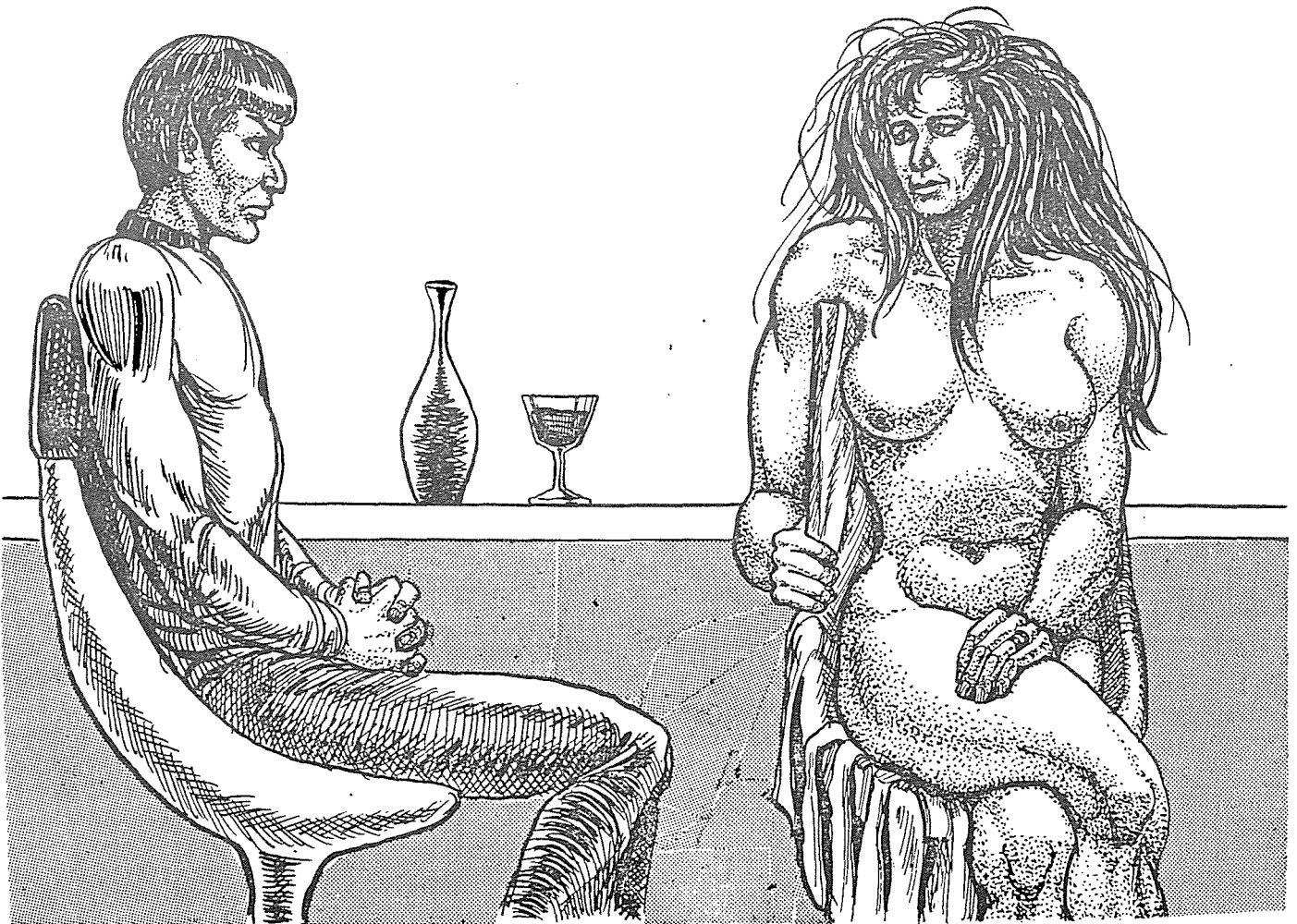
NO, I AM NOT. APPARENTLY THE MENTAL CONTACT WITH JIM DURING THE STRENUOUS HEALING PROCESS HAS DAMAGED ME IN SOME WAY. I FIND THAT MY CONTROL HAS BEEN BREACHED AT SEVERAL POINTS, ALLOWING UNEXPECTED EMOTIONAL REACTIONS TO BREAK THROUGH AT ODD MOMENTS. I CANNOT ACCURATELY EVALUATE THE DAMAGE, BUT AFTER VISITING COORDINATOR ROANTREE THIS EVENING, I HAVE REASON TO BELIEVE THAT IT IS EXTENSIVE.

IN SOMETHING RESEMBLING DESPERATION, I VISITED HER WITH THE INTENTION OF ENLISTING HER AID TO DRAW QUANNECHOTA AWAY FROM THE

CAPTAIN. I HAD EXPECTED THAT NORMAL HUMAN JEALOUSY WOULD AID ME, GIVEN THE ANARCHISTS' POLYMORPHOUS SEXUAL CUSTOMS AND ROANTREE'S FORMER RELATIONSHIP WITH QUANNECHOTA. IN THIS I WAS DISASTEROUSLY MISTAKEN. I HAD ALSO PLANNED TO OBTAIN FROM ROANTREE THE IDENTITY OF THE ... CONTRARY COMMUNICATIONS OFFICER. I WAS UNSUCCESSFUL IN THIS ALSO.

THE DISCUSSION TOOK UNEXPECTED DIRECTIONS FROM THE MOMENT I ENTERED ROANTREE'S CABIN AND FOUND HER EMERGING FROM THE SHOWER. SHE WORE NOTHING BUT A TOWEL OVER ONE SHOULDER, WHICH SHE THEN SPREAD ON HER CHAIR BEFORE SEATING HERSELF. I HAVE ENCOUNTERED MANY CULTURES WITH FEW OR NO NUDITY TABOOS, BUT ON THIS OCCASION MY REACTION WAS UNEXPECTED, UNSETTLING AND UNCONTROLLABLE: I WAS UNABLE TO KEEP MY EYES ON HER FACE, OR MY CONCENTRATION ON THE TASK AT HAND. MY ATTENTION KEPT STRAYING TO SUCH IRREVELANCIES AS HER MAMMARY AND ABDOMINAL SKIN-TONES, THE SUBTLE REVELATIONS OF UNUSUAL MUSCULATURE WHEN SHE MOVED, THE DISTURBING SIMILARITIES OF HER VOICE AND GESTURES AND EYES TO JIM'S...

FURTHER, HER OPENING QUESTION STARTED THE CONVERSATION IN AN UNANTICIPATED COURSE. "WHAT PROBLEM BRINGS YOU DOWN HERE, SPOCK?" SHE SAID. "IT MUST BE SERIOUS TROUBLE TO TAKE YOU INTO THIS BARBARIAN'S DEN ALL ALONE." I ASSURED HER THAT I DID NOT CONSIDER HER BARBARIC. SHE REPLIED WITH A BARNYARD EPITHET AND CALLED ME A POOR LIAR. "YOU KEEP YOUR FACE STIFF AND YOUR VOICE LEVEL," SHE ELABORATED, "BUT THE WORDS AND ACTIONS GIVE YOU AWAY. NONE OF YOU PEOPLE LIKE US, AND YOU'LL BE JUST AS GLAD TO SEE US OFF THE SHIP. I'LL WAGER THAT'S THE MOTIVE BEHIND WHATEVER YOU CAME TO TELL ME."



TO COUNTER THIS ACCUSATION I WAS COMPELLED TO REPHRASE MY ARGUMENT, AND I DID IT BADLY. I ACTUALLY SAID: "I THINK QUANNECHOTA SPENDS TOO MUCH TIME WITH JIM." MY SUBSEQUENT EXPLANATIONS -- THAT SHE DISTRACTS HIM FROM HIS WORK, CAUSES HIM TO OVEREXERT HIMSELF, KEEPS HIM FROM SUFFICIENT CONTACT WITH HIS CREW AND GENERALLY MONOPOLIZES HIS TIME -- DID NOT SUFFICIENTLY NEUTRALIZE THE EFFECT OF THAT FIRST MISSTATEMENT. INDEED, ROANTREE DID NOT EVEN ALLOW ME TO FINISH WHAT I WAS SAYING.

"SPOCK," SHE INTERRUPTED, "GIVE UP. SHE MAY BE A POOR COUNTRY BUMPKIN BY YOUR STANDARDS, BUT SHE'S HIS WIFE -- BY HIS EXCLUSIVE MARRIAGE CUSTOMS -- AND HE LOVES HER. IT'S TOO LATE; THERE'S NOTHING YOU OR I CAN DO TO STOP IT. WHAT CAN'T BE CURED MUST BE ENDURED, AND WE BOTH JUST HAVE TO GO BACK TO BEING LONELY."

ASTONISHED BY THIS COMMENT, I LOOKED UP TO SEE IF SHE MIGHT BE JOKING. SHE WAS NOT. WHAT I SAW WAS AN UNMISTAKENABLE HUMAN EXPRESSION OF PITY. I COULD NOT REFRAIN FROM ASKING: "WHY DO YOU PITY ME?"

"BECAUSE YOU'RE SO OBVIOUSLY MISERABLE," SHE SAID. "EVER SINCE JIM RECOVERED YOU'VE BEEN DRAGGING AROUND AFTER HIM, HOVERING SILENT AT HIS SHOULDER, TRYING TO COMMUNICATE SOMETHING THAT YOU CAN'T QUITE SAY AND HE CAN'T QUITE HEAR -- LIKE A POOR GHOST TRYING TO SPEAK THROUGH A OUIJA-BOARD. IT ALMOST HURTS TO WATCH YOU."

I COULD NOT ANSWER. LITERALLY, COULD NOT. I WAS KEPT SILENT BY AN ASTONISHING, UNCONTROLLABLE, EMOTIONAL REACTION. ME! I... AGREED. I FELT A PROFOUND AND UNDENIABLE AGREEMENT WITH HER OBSERVATION. YES, I HAVE BEEN MISERABLE. I HAVE NOT BEEN ABLE TO CONTROL IT. I HAD NOT REALIZED THAT IT WAS SO OBVIOUS.

ROANTREE THEN BRUSHED TWO FINGERS THROUGH MY HAIR -- INTENDED AS A GESTURE OF SYMPATHY, BUT ITS EFFECT ON ME WAS SIMILAR TO AN ELECTRIC SHOCK -- AND SHE ASKED: "AS LONG AS YOU'RE HERE, COULD YOU TEACH ME TO PLAY CHESS? ALL I KNOW IS CHECKERS, AND I'D BE GRATEFUL FOR THE COMPANY." I DEMURRED AS POLITELY AS I COULD MANAGE, PLEADING PRESSURE OF WORK. SHE RESPONDED WITH ANOTHER BARNYARD EPITHET. I HAVE NEVER HEARD THE WORD 'BULLSHIT' SPOKEN WITH SUCH GENTLENESS...

I DEPARTED QUICKLY, SEIZED BY AN APPALLING URGE TO FLEE. FORTY MINUTES OF SUBSEQUENT MEDITATION AND MENTAL EXERCISES HAVE FAILED TO COMPLETELY SUBDUCE MY ILLOGICAL REACTIONS. I CAN NO LONGER BE CERTAIN OF MY CONTROL, MY OBJECTIVITY, MY... VALIDITY. I DO NOT UNDERSTAND THIS. QUANNECHOTA DID THIS TO ME, BUT IT IS JENNETH ROANTREE WHO AGGRAVATES IT.

I MUST NOT SEE HER AGAIN.

Roantree was on the bridge when Starbase 12 came into view. Kirk pointed it out to her, and she promptly asked Uhura to notify the rest of the Anarchists. Within five minutes, as Uhura reported, 20% of the Enterprise's intercom viewers were locked onto the approaching station. Within ten minutes the lone ship parked at the starbase became visible on the screens, and the intercom buzzed with Anarchist speculations over whether it was theirs. Within fifteen minutes Kirk's repeated queries confirmed the guess and identified the ship: the Galilei, NCC-3808, Class-I Transport/Tug, with one MK-5 transport container. The words "Starfleet Command", Kirk noted, had been removed from the hulls.

The Anarchists crowded the intercom with mutual congratulations; but Kirk leaned back in the command chair, took a long look, and considered just what this peculiar gift implied.

Transport/Tugs were the heavy trucks of Starfleet. They could pull nine times their weight at a top speed of warp 6, or get up to warp 8 if not hauling freight -- though that wasn't recommended for anything but emergencies. They carried two banks of phasers, but nothing like photon torpedoes. They were not terribly maneuverable, but powerfully engines. They usually carried a crew of 220, mostly required for maintenance of the cargo, and in a pinch a crew of 40 could manage -- just barely. MK-5 containers were designed for 'products', which meant 'general-odds-and-ends-that-can't-be-classified'. When necessary they could be used for dry bulk, fluids, cold storage, passengers -- or as lifeboats.

The Galilei was one of the oldest ships in the fleet, older than a lot of Admirals in Starfleet Command, long overdue to be decommissioned and scrapped. The MK-5 container didn't look much younger. They were scarred and battered and patched and looked about as space-worthy as a couple of old empty beer-cans.

"Can we go aboard and look at it, right now?" Roantree asked, starry-eyed.

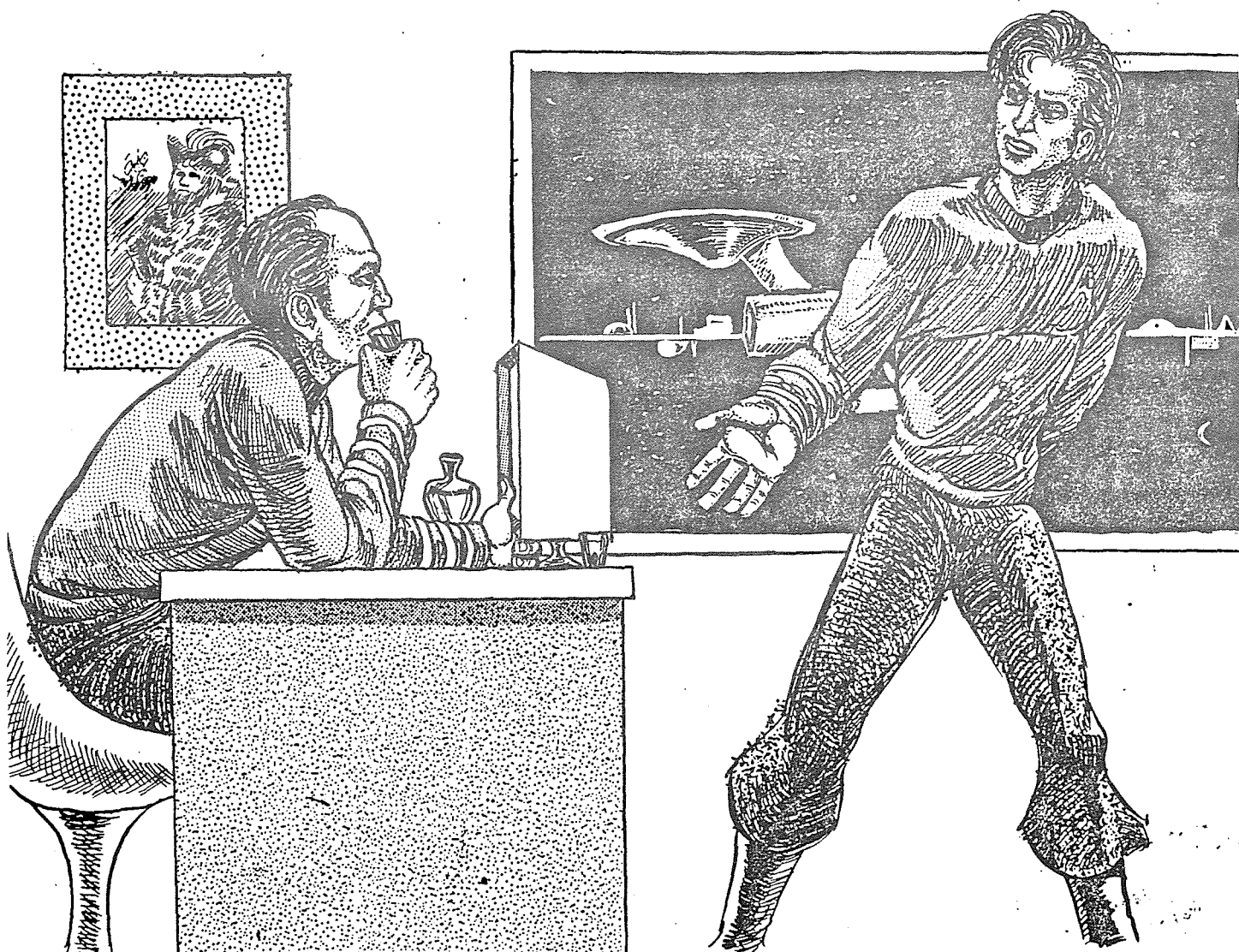
I don't like the look of this... Kirk turned to Uhura, who was studying the Anarchists' 'new' ship with as narrow-eyed gaze as his own, and requested a line to the 'port authority'. Uhura understood perfectly, and put him through. A moments' polite questioning revealed that the officials were willing -- nay, eager -- to let the Anarchists beam over to the Galilei at once. However, all visitors were warned to wear spacesuits.

Roantree whooped gleefully and ran off into the turbolift. Kirk punched the intercom and relayed the news to the rest of the Anarchists. In five minutes the first group of them had scrambled into spacesuits, run down to the transporter room and beamed over. Kirk quietly contacted the base-commander's office and promised to present himself in twenty minutes.

The first person Kirk saw as he materialized in the base-command office was Commodore Jose Mendez. "Jim!" the Commodore chortled, grin almost splitting his face as he stepped forward to shake Kirk's hand. "Welcome back! Come on into my inner sanctum and make yourself comfortable... Mr. Halley, will you see that I'm not disturbed for the next hour? Ah, sit down, Jim. I don't have any brandy, won't until the next supply ship arrives, but I think you'll like this Argellian stuff.

"Uh, right." Kirk was a little off-balance from this reception. "It's good stuff, Sir."

"You can call me Jose while the door's closed." Mendez leaned back in his chair and looked Kirk up and down. "You look like hell, Jim. I've never seen you underweight before."



"I'm getting it back. McCoy's got me on a weight-gain diet, for a change. Other than that, he says, I'm fit."

"How did you blackmail him into saying that?" Mendez smiled over his glass. "Threaten to put the Anarchists back in his Sickbay?"

"No, I promised to stick to my diet," Kirk chuckled. "But what have you been up to? What are you doing here, instead of Starbase 11?"

"Hah! I'm being unofficially reprimanded, that's what!" Mendez tossed off his drink and set down the glass. "It's a simple case of Incurring the Wrath of a Superior -- specifically, Admiral Komack."

"Oh no," Kirk groaned in sympathy. "What did you do to ruffle his feathers?"

"You ought to know; you were in it." Mendez idly fetched himself another drink. "Remember that Talos mess?"

"Hell, yes. But you said the charges were dropped."

"Jim, do you know what happens when a lowly Commodore takes it upon himself to tamper with General Order Number Seven? Oh yes, I got you off the hook for that one -- you and Spock both -- but that neatly put me on the hook instead. Komack was breathing fire all the way to the inquest. A hot little contest that was, too! Fortunately, being an old cynic from way back, I had a good case prepared. Starfleet grudgingly approved, dropped the charges, no reprimand even. Unfortunately, Komack didn't agree. He's been giving me a headache ever since. This is a smaller base than 11, and it might be called a comedown. Also, he wants to keep me in this sector so he can keep an eye on me, personally. He does drop in pretty often, and makes life miserable for all the command personnel on the base."

"Damn, I'm sorry! I didn't know anything about it. I should've --"

"No, don't worry. I've survived worse than Komack. Besides, I'm due for promotion in another year and a half. Hell, you're due for one sooner than that."

"Huh? What do you mean?" Kirk was genuinely surprised.

"What? Jim, don't tell me you've forgotten the date! Your five-year mission is almost up. Don't you remember?"

"Why... so it is," Kirk looked down at his glass to keep the shock on his face hidden. "What with all this excitement of the last nine-- few months, it slipped my mind. ...over? All this to get them back, and now I'm going to lose them anyway?"

"An upcoming promotion is a hell of a thing to forget..." Mendez stopped, eyeing Kirk shrewdly. "Ah, I can guess. Don't want to give up your ship, do you?"

"No." Kirk raised his head and managed a creditable grin. "I... just can't see myself taking a ground command. That's your job, Jose. You're an administrative genius, and I'm not. No, don't deny it. Hell, I couldn't have tangled with the Admiral and won! I guess I just plain belong on a ship. Damn right, I don't want to give her up."

"You may not have to, you know. There's more than one Commodore flying around in Starship-class. That's what Wesley did. Only way they could pry him off the Lexington was to make him governor of Mantilles. Remember?"

"How could I forget?" ... 'Starship-class'... "But never mind that now. We have serious business on our hands right this minute. Jose, what's this about giving Jen-- Roantree's people the Galilei?"

"Oh. Well, you said yourself that they wanted a ship of their own." Mendez had never been a good poker player; his face showed too much. It was showing embarrassment now. "Something like the Galilei they could handle, even with a crew of 41."

"40," Kirk corrected. "I married one of them and she'll be staying with me."

"Ah... of course."

"Come on, Jose; if it was only a question of crew-size, Starfleet would have given them a Scout-ship, or one of the smaller classes. Besides, I know about the Galilei as well as you do; that flying sieve should've been decommissioned fifteen years ago. What do you mean, giving them a wreck like that after all they've done?"

"Jim, ah, the Galilei IS decommissioned-- as of four weeks ago."

"Is that why-- Cheap trick! Goddammit, those people save the galaxy for us, and all they get is a leaky old decommissioned tug!?"

"Jim, Jim, calm down! That isn't all they're getting; we've got a planet for them."

"A... planet?" Option 4! Kirk obligingly calmed down. "Do you know what kind? Which one?"

"How should I know? I haven't read your orders. Here they are, by the way." Mendez reached into his desk and brought out a sheaf of sealed papers. "All I can tell you is that your friends are getting a world, and a ship to take them there."

Kirk took the papers and shuffled through them. "It's quite a bundle. Why so many? And from so many different departments, too... Ham."

"Umm, look, this is just between us." Mendez leaned closer, lowering his voice. "The fact is, nobody really knows what to do about your strange friends. Everyone has a different idea and they're all fighting with each other. The only thing they can agree on is that the Anarchists cannot -- but, NOT -- under any circumstances be allowed to land on Earth."

"Why not?" Kirk had a sneaking suspicion that this injunction was not made for the benefit of the Anarchists.

"I can't give you all the details, but it seems that there are plenty of people on Earth who might sympathize with them: old cultural pockets dating damn-near to the Eugenics Wars, a lot of those Edenite youngsters, political malcontents-- hell, where do you think People for Temporal Control got started? Starfleet and Fed-Central and Earth's government all agree that 41-- excuse me, 40-- successful and belligerent Anarchists settled on Earth could focus all that discontent into a serious problem. You can understand that, can't you?"

"40 people? Do all that?" How many 'malcontents' are there?

"40 very unusual people, as you've said yourself. Besides, how could they be happy there? It's nothing like the Earth they knew. They'd be lost there."

"So instead we send them off to deal with an empty world. Damn, you know as well as I do that 40 people don't make a sufficient gene-pool -- especially if they have genetic problems already. They won't last past the third generation!"

"I didn't say they'd be alone, Jim." Mendez smiled. "One thing I do know about this world they're sending your friends to; that's where we've been sending the Edenites."

"What? You mean you've finally found a place the Edenites like?"

"From all reports, they love it."

"Whew! It must be a garden-world, very easy to live on. Edenites are anti-technology... Oh-oh. Jose, Jenneth's people are science-worshippers. They despise anti-technology types. Don't you think that'll cause a problem?"

"Not according to the department that thought it up. Maybe they're hoping that the Edenites will make the Anarchists less violent, and the Anarchists will make the Edenites less hostile to science. Besides, a planet can be a pretty big

place when there are only a few people on it. If they absolutely can't get along with each other, they can settle on different continents. Maybe their grandchildren will be willing to make peace, trade, and cultural exchange."

"Especially if they intend to interbreed..."

"I wish you wouldn't put it quite that way," Mendez winced. "It sounds like you're talking about livestock."

"Sorry. I'm used to the way Jenneth's people put it. Hmm... another one from Starfleet Command, one from Starfleet Academy -- What the hell?"

"Oh. That." Mendez looked embarrassed again. "It seems that some of the Anarchists have been asking about joining Starfleet."

"What?!?"

"You heard me. Apparently some of them even qualify. Rumor has it that Starfleet's willing to take them, provided they're 'amenable to the discipline of the service', as the saying goes."

"Jose, this is insane." Kirk rubbed his forehead. "I've heard of spectacular bureaucratic foul-ups, even seen a few, but this has got to take the prize. 'Amenable to the discipline of the service'? Not in 100 years -- or generations. These people use 'law' as a dirty word. They think all government is tyranny. Give them an order and they'll treat you like a mad dog. I've lived with them for half a year, and I know what they're like."

"Well, even if they won't take it, the hand's held out." Mendez sighed. "I assume they haven't begun to suspect anything yet."

"Not yet. I don't know how much longer that'll last."

"Long enough for you to take them to their new home without forcing them, I hope."

"We take them? Oh thanks!"

"Jim, you're the only man in Starfleet who even knows how to talk to them! I'm afraid you're stuck with the job -- for a little longer, anyway."

"The hard part is going to be persuading them to give up all thought of going back to Earth. Any suggestions on that one?"

"I haven't the least idea." Mendez shrugged and sipped his drink. "Set your Social Science's teams to work on it."

"In other words, it's still my problem." Kirk sighed, straightening the documents, and stood up. "I'd best get back to the ship and work on it. Just one more thing..."

"Name it, Jim."

"Besides stinginess, why did Starfleet give Jenneth's people a wreck like the Galilei?"

Mendez did his best not to look ashamed. "I'm not sure, Jim. Maybe just so the Anarchists could have the fun of fixing it up to their own specifications."

"Fix it up? With what?"

"You've got a Starbase here to work with. My orders are to give the Anarchists anything they need-- within reason."

"Even so, just getting that thing mobile again will take a good while. What if other ships come in during that time?"

How will we keep their crews away from Jenneth's people, keep the cat from getting out of the bag? What about the Starbase personnel? One loose word can give the game away."

"Don't worry. All my people have been briefed, and all other ships have been re-routed elsewhere and warned to stay away. The only thing coming in this month is the supply ship, and her crew's been warned. Don't think all that didn't take work! Starfleet is really doing a lot for these people, Jim."

"Yes, but..." Something here doesn't quite make sense... "I still think giving them the Galilei was a cheap trick."

"Don't tell me; tell Starfleet Command. It's probably just another 'camel' case... Ah, you know; a camel is a horse assembled by a committee. Same thing here. You beaming back now?"

"Yes. Thanks for the Argellian whatever-it-is. I'll get back to you as soon as I can."

"Sure thing, but don't be surprised if I'm out. With a whole Starbase to run, I'm not always in my office."

"Catch you when I can, then. Enterprise, beam me up."

"Adios, Jim."

Hendez kept smiling until the last of the transporter hum was gone. Then the expression dropped off his face like a discarded mask. He dragged his sleeve across his forehead, downed the Argellian liquor in one gulp, leaned on his desk and swore for ten minutes without stopping.

Stardate 5931.6, Personal Log, Scott Recording:

I DINNA LIKE IT. I DINNA LIKE IT A'. FAILURES IN EVERRA SYSTEM, WHOLE MODULES FUSED OR RIPPED OOT, MOUNTINGS DEFORMED AN' INTERFACES SA ILL-MATCHED THOT THERE'S LESS THAN 20% CONTACT IN SOME PLACES, HUNDREDS O' BREACHES IN THE SKIN, PATCHES ON THE PATCHES AND THEN LEAKIN' TOO, EVEN WEAKNESSES IN THE STRUCTURAL SUPPORTS... OCH, AWFUL! GOD KNOWS HOW THE GALILEI MADE IT TA BASE. I'LL WAGER SHE WAS TOWED. AN' WE'RE SUPPOSED TO REPAIR THIS MESS? WE'D DO BETTER TA MELT HER DOWN AN' START OVER!

SO THIS IS THE PAYMENT THEY GET FOR SAVIN' THE GALAXY. 'TWOULD BE MAIR HONEST TA PITCH 'EM OOT AN AIRLOCK AN' HA'DONE WITH IT! 'TIS A SLAP IN THE FACE, AN' EVEN THE MOST INNOCENT OF THE ANARCHISTS COULD SEE IT, IF THEY WEREN'T SA DRUNK ON WONDERS... I'LL VOW THAT ANNIE'S FIGURIN' IT OOT A'READY, AN' ROANTREE WON'T BE FAR BEHIND. WHAT'LL HAPPEN THEN? 'TWOULDNA SURPRISE ME IF THEY COME AN' BEAT THE LIVIN' PISS OUT O' EVERRA' ONE ON THE BASE-- AN' THEN TAKE IT OWER FOR THESEL'S...

NAY, TOO FAR. I' NO' ENCOURAGE SUCH. BET BEGOD, I KNOW A THING OR TWO ABOUT SALVAGIN' WRECKS-- AYE, AN' WHEEDLIN' SUPPLIES OFF O' STARBASES, AS WEEL. I'LL GET THEM A DECENT SHIP, BY ONE MEANS OR T'OTHER.

When Kirk walked back onto the bridge, nobody noticed him, not even Spock. All eyes were fixed on the main screen, and in an instant Kirk saw why. The image showed a magnified view of the Galilei's hull, with spacesuited Anarchists crawling over it like ants. Most of them were holding Engineers' tricorders, a few of them were already busy with tools, and a couple of them were studying diagrams and blueprints that were stretched out on the hull and held in place with magnetic clamps. As Kirk watched, six people in Engineer's spacesuits and Starbase 12 insignias materialized near the spread papers. One of the Anarchists, thick bronze hair unmistakable even at this distance, went over to the new arrivals and began talking to them. Another Anarchist -- gray-haired, thickset, female, obviously Bailey -- came up and joined the conversation with much stamping and arm-waving. The Starbase personnel looked at each other, looked at the Anarchists, nodded vigorously and went their separate ways, hauling tools off their belts as they moved off down the hull.

"Uhura," Kirk's voice made the bridge personnel jump guiltily. "Put me through to the Engineers' squad-leader, tight-beam."

"Yessir," Uhura hastily complied.

"Lt. Duocmom here," said the squad-leader, as the viewscreen image zoomed in on him. "Can I help you, Captain?"

"You can explain to me just what's going on over there," said Kirk. "I just got back from the base-commander's office, and I find people climbing all over the ship. Fill me in, please."

"Er, well Sir, the Commadore told us to 'render all assistance required', within certain limits, that is. We're supposed to help the Anarchists get this tub space-worthy." he shrugged and gave a silly smile, showing what he thought of the idea. "We didn't think they'd be calling on us so soon, but..."

"I see. What progress has been made?"

"They're checking her out right now, going over every millimeter, and pretty damn thoroughly, too. A few of them have already started asking for tools and materials. They do seem to know their business, Sir."

"Yes, they do. Exactly what are the 'certain limits' on your assistance?"

Lt. Duocmom glanced about him, as if afraid of eavesdroppers. "The radio, for one thing. They've got intra-ship communications and the navigational channel, and that's all. That way they can't overhear anything they shouldn't, if you know what I mean. Besides that, all the dangerous info's been taken out of the computer, and of course the phaser banks have been removed."

"Of course..." No ears, no library, no claws... you think they won't notice? "Very good, Lieutenant. Carry on. And remember not to act snobbish in their presence. Kirk out."

"Sir...?" the lieutenant puzzled as the contact broke.

"Now, Uhura, get Jenneth Roantree."

"Yessir."

The screen-image changed to a close-up of Roantree, crouching over the diagrams. She acknowledged the call without looking up. "Yes, Jim?"

"How do you like your new ship, Jenneth?" Kirk managed to keep his voice light. "I noticed you haven't wasted any time looking it over."

"Well, we've been waiting a long time for this." Roantree straightened up and looked down the length of the hull. "I don't want to sound ungrateful, and maybe I've gotten spoiled living on your ship, but frankly, Jim, I think this mother is a mess. Big chunks of wiring missing, break-downs in damn near every system, whole decks with no power, weak spots in the skin -- hell, one of the nacelle-supports shows signs of metal fatigue in the main struts. Bailey's planning to detach, strip and re-temper them. It'll have to be done here in orbit, since the repair-dock people say they can't take in something that big. Scotty says there's a way to do it; shape a force-field -- maybe using deflector screens -- around the strut, heat it with the phasers, then drop the force-field and let cold space temper it. Trouble is, we've got no phasers."

"I see." Didn't take them long to find that out. "So what are you going to do?"

"Scotty said not to worry; he'd get us some repair equipment. Right now he's arguing with Bailey about the tempering procedure. She thinks plain space-chilling wouldn't pull off the heat fast enough; we should chill with fluid."

"Scotty's over there with you?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Oh, nothing's wrong. I was just wondering where he was. Ah, I've got some more good news for you, Jen. Besides the

ship, Starfleet's giving you a planet."

"A what?!" Roantree looked as if she'd been pole-axed.

"A world of your own; a whole planet." Kirk grinned, ignoring the stares of the bridge crew. "What were you saying the other day about land prices?"

"Great Mother of All!" Roantree sat down quickly. "A whole world? To ourselves? I mean, nobody else? Just 41 people...uh..."

"No, I hear there are some other people there; maybe a couple hundred, maybe less. They're, ah, agriculturalists and artists -- very sweet-tempered people, maybe a little silly, devout Nature-worshippers -- and they're a good genetic mix. I think you'll like them."

"Phew!" Roantree tried to press her hands to her head, but they were stopped by the helmet. "Settle a whole planet! We'll need all kinds of things: tools, seed, livestock... Hah! So that's why they gave us a cargo-carrier! Lord of Light, we'll have to get in touch with our people back on Earth, see how many of them want to go. Oh, so much to think about! Where is this place? How close to Earth?"

"Er, I don't know yet; I just heard about it myself. I'll go look it up for you as soon as I can. Would you send Scotty back as soon as you're through with him? I'd like to have him take care of the Enterprise's repairs too, when he's got the time."

Roantree laughed, shaking her head in amazement. She was still bewildered.

"Oh, Jen," Kirk added off-handedly, "Don't worry about getting back to Earth right away. There's no need to rush. Get your ship fixed up properly first. Happy repairs. Kirk out."

"Uh, 'bye..." The viewscreen shifted from Roantree's dazed face, back to an overview of the Galilei.

Kirk leaned back in the command-chair, rubbing his eyes and swearing to himself. Still my job... explain to them... keep them away from Earth... thanks loads, Starfleet... "Uhura, call Mendez back."

"Yessir."

The face that appeared on the viewscreen didn't belong to the Commodore but to his aide, Halley -- a poker-faced young man with the bland, slightly reproving look of a born bureaucrat. "The Commodore is not in his office at present, Captain. May I help you?"

"I damn-well hope so," Kirk growled. "First, I want to know the identity of the planet I'm supposed to take Jenneth's people to. Second, I want to know what supplies the Galilei will be hauling there. Third, I want to know if there are any other settlers going with us.

"Oh no, Sir; there are no other settlers going with you." The aide's face remained professionally unruffled. "The other subjects are covered in your orders. Is there anything else, Sir?"

"Not right now. Kirk out." Evasions, evasions! It smells...

The image winked away. Kirk uttered a barnyard epithet that startled the bridge crew, and stood up. Still my problem. High time I look at those orders. "Mr. Spock, You have the con. I'll be in my quarters. Send Scott to me when he gets back." He practically stomped off the bridge, and fumed all the way to his cabin. Passing crewmen noted an odd thumping from the turbolift, as if someone were kicking the walls.

Stardate 5931.6, Communications Log, Starbase Repair Crew 3:

DUOCHOM TO TEAM 3. GET CLEAR OF THE GALILEI'S HULL AND PUT UP SUIT-SHIELDS. THEY'RE STARTING THE ENGINES. E.T.

TIMBO TO DUOCHOM: THE ANARCHISTS ARE STILL ON BOARD. SHOULDN'T WE CLEAR THEM OFF TOO? E.T.

DUOCHOM TO TIMBO: NEGATIVE, YOU IDIOT. I'VE TOLD YOU A DOZEN TIMES NOT TO GIVE THOSE WEIRDOS ANYTHING RESEMBLING AN ORDER. THEY WANT TO STAY ON BOARD AND THAT'S IT. IF THEY FRY, THEY FRY. E.T.

TIMBO TO DUOCHOM: OKAY, OKAY. I JUST THINK IT'S AN UNNECESSARY RISK. DAMN WASTE, TOO. DID YOU GET A LOOK AT SOME OF THOSE WOMEN? E.T.

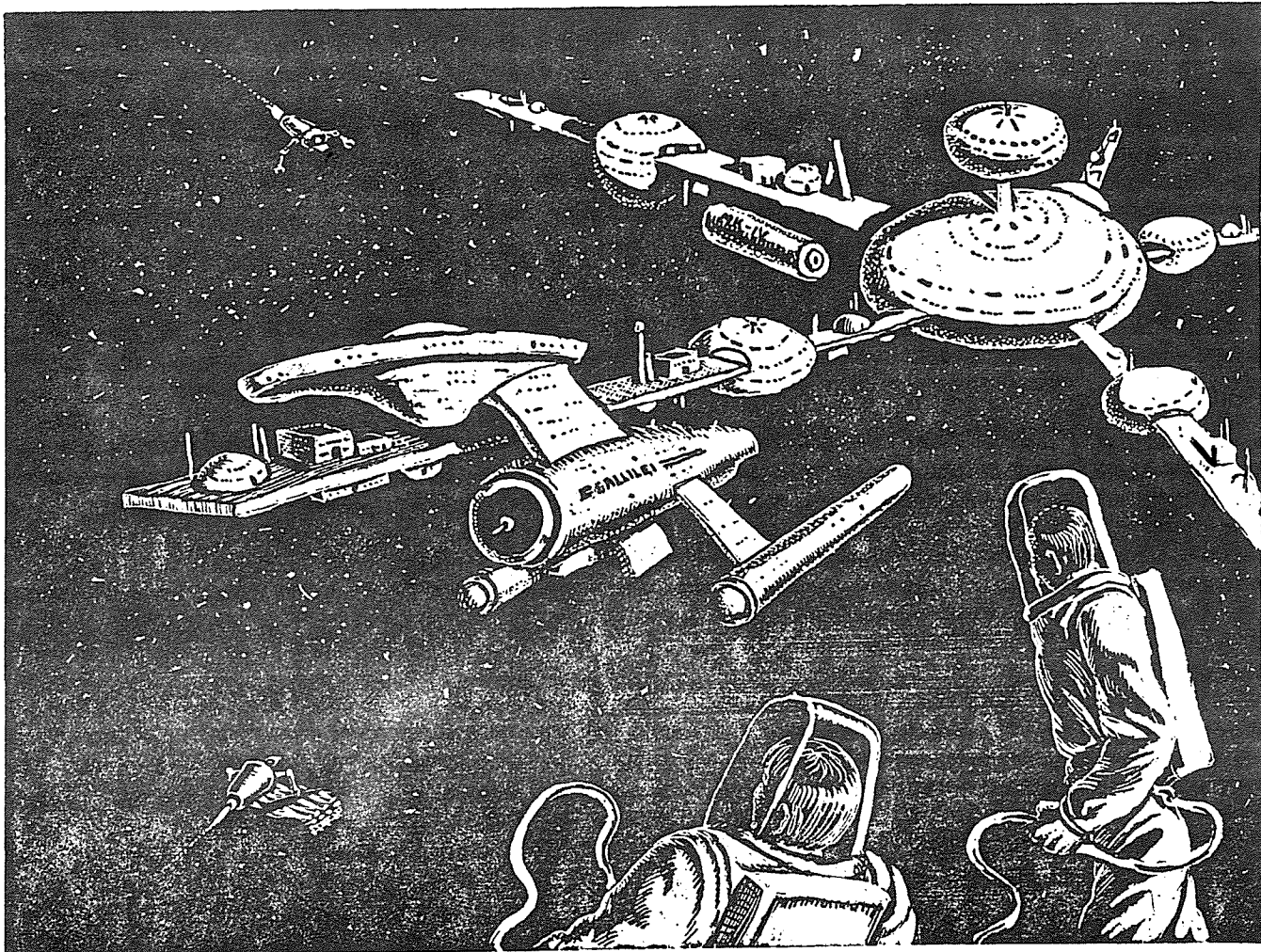
DUOCHOM TO TIMBO: SURE DID. WHEW! THEY'VE GOT BALCONIES ON THEIR SPACESUITS! I'D SURE LIKE TO CLIMB THAT ONE, THE BROAD WITH THE BRAIDS... SAY, IS SHE WEARING ANYTHING UNDER THAT SPACESUIT?...UH, E.T.

TIMBO TO DUOCHOM: SHE IS, BUT THE BLONDE ISN'T. I ASKED HER. SHE SAYS SHE LIKES THE FREEDOM. WHEEE! HM, E.T.

DUOCHOM TO TIMBO: I'D LOVE TO GET HER ALONE IN THE AIRLOCK. HEY, IS IT TRUE WHAT THEY SAY ABOUT THOSE ANARCHISTS WOMEN? THEY REALLY AS HOT AS ORION GREEN SLAVE GIRLS? TAKE YOU ON FOR NOTHING BUT A SMILE? HUH?... E.T.

TIMBO TO DUOCHOM: DON'T ASK ME, ASK THE ENTERPRISE CREW. HEH! HEH! HEH! E.T.

DUOCHOM TO TIMBO: WHAT'RE YOU LAUGHING ABOUT? COME ON, TELL ME. E.T.



TIMBO TO DUOCNOM: WELL, JUST BECAUSE YOU'RE AN OLD BUDDY OF MINE, I'LL LET YOU IN ON THE SECRET. ACCORDING TO EVERYBODY I'VE TALKED TO FROM THE ENTERPRISE, THOSE ARE THE TOUGHEST BROADS THIS SIDE OF CYGNUS 14. THEY--

OH, NO! AMAZONS?

WORSE THAN THAT, OLD BUDDY. IF THEY LIKE YOUR LOOKS, THEY'LL HAUL YOU RIGHT INTO THE SACK-- BUT IF YOU DON'T WORK HARD ENOUGH TO KEEP THEM HAPPY, THEY'LL KICK YOU RIGHT OUT AGAIN. IF THEY DON'T LIKE YOUR LOOKS, GIVE UP: THEY'LL AS SOON KNOCK YOUR BLOCK OFF AS SAY GOOD MORNING.

UMHH... REAL WILDCATS, HUH? NO FINESSE, OR ANYTHING?

OR ANYTHING. AND THE MEN ARE JUST THE SAME.

KNOCK YOUR BLOCK OFF IF YOU LOOK AT 'EM CROSS-EYED?

HEH! HEH! OR HAUL YOU INTO THE SACK!

GOOD NIGHT, NURSE!

DON'T SAY I DIDN'T WARN YOU.

UH, YEAH. THANKS I'LL WATCH FOR IT. --HEY, THEY'RE STARTING! ALL HANDS, VISORS UP. YELLOW ALERT. READY FOR EMERGENCY PROCEDURES. E.T.

... HOLDING ... HOLDING *... DING ...*

... WELL, I'LL BE DAMNED! *... DAMNED ...*

THEY'RE STILL IN ONE PIECE!

HMM. DUOCNOM TO TEAM #3: SECURE FROM YELLOW ALERT. E.T.

... TOUGH LUCK FOR US. *... FOR US ...*

WHAT'S THAT, TIMBO?

I MEAN, NOW WE'VE GOTTA GO BACK TO WORKING FOR THEM. I'VE GOT A NASTY FEELING THAT THEY'RE GOING TO WORK OUR BUTTS OFF, BESIDES BEING A REAL PAIN TO GET ALONG WITH. ...E.T.

DUOCNOM TO TIMBO: CONSIDER IT ONE OF THE NECESSARY HARDSHIPS OF THE SERVICE. E.T.

Scott came in, still in his spacesuit, before Kirk had finished reading all the orders. There were indeed very many of them, from many different offices, and they were gorgeously contradictory. Kirk was just as well pleased to stop reading them for a while.

"Ye wanted ta see me, Captain?"

"Yes, I did. Get out of that thing and sit down." Kirk stretched, joints crackling, and shoved the orders to one side. "Scotty, tell me; what do you really think of the Galilei?"

Scott pursed his lips and thought awhile before answering. "'Tis a rancid haggis, Sir. There isn't a commercial space-line this side o' the Rim would have it for anythin' but scrap. I'd call it a bluidy insult ta th' Anarchists, ta' give 'em such a wreck. They're havin' fun playin' with it, though..."

"Can she be made space-worthy?"

"Och, barely." Scott shook his head. "She'll fly -- at nae mair than Warp 5 wi' any safety, an' no' for too long."

"Uhhm. In other words, it's meant for no more than a one-way trip."

"Aye, Sir. It looks that way." Scott studied his hands with elaborate concern. "Whatever this planet is that Starfleet gi'en 'em, they're no' intended ta' leave it wi'oot help."

"I see." Option #2. For Jenneth? No... But will it work? "What are the chances that Jenneth's people could repair the Galilei better than that? Starfleet may have underestimated them."

"Aye..." Scott had been thinking about that himself. "'Tis possible. They're verra ingenious people. Yon idea o' reteperin' tha struts wi' fluid inside a force-field--"

"See to it, then." Kirk didn't realize he'd made his decision until the words were out of his mouth. "They're authorized to use a lot of the base's supplies, and you're authorized for even more. Give them what they need, Scotty; do anything you can think of to make that old ruin operational. Land alone isn't enough for those people; they're born spacers, and they deserve a ship they can use. With that transport canister and a decent ship they could earn a living as traders, deal with the local planets, become respectable partners..." 'Don't count your chickens... He cut off the thought.

"Aye, Sir." A beatific smile wreathed across Scott's face. "I'll go get tha' transporter parts right away." He stood up and started to leave.

"Transporter parts?" Kirk stopped him. "What's wrong with the Galilei's transporter?"

"Eh, just that the parts they've got are almost worn oot, and there's no replacements aboard. The base's been tellin' the Anarchists that they've got no spares, but they said itherwise ta me. It looks as if someone doesna' want tha Anarchists ta have a transporter for verra long; the Galilei's is likely to break down in a couple mair weeks at this rate."

"---and leave them stranded. Uh-huh." Starfleet didn't see fit to tell me that. Kirk's eyes narrowed. "Get them whatever they need, Scotty. You have my support on it."

"Aye, Sir." Scott picked up his space-suit and trotted jauntily out.

Kirk sighed and went back to study the bewildering orders. There was, he considered, one advantage to having orders that contradicted each other. I can pick and choose between them... use my own judgment... find some justification for almost anything. Nobody told me NOT to give them transporter parts!

He opened the last sealed paper and noted, with weary satisfaction, that it concerned the Anarchists' new planet. It looked all right; Earth-normal gravity, atmosphere, etc. The coordinates puzzled him. ...Well within Federation territory...? Too many settled, civilized planets near there. Why not out on the border? Why here? ...something smells. He reached for his computer console, asked for an identification readout, and fed in the co-ordinates. In a second or two the name of the planet appeared on the viewscreen.

Omicron Ceti III.

"Oh my god..." Kirk whispered, as understanding came. One-way trip! ...They've been dumping Edenites there, and now-- Option #6! Cheap and sure they'll never even know what's happening! Damn your odds, Spock-- and damn all Starfleet Command!

He snapped off the viewer, got up, and almost ran all the way to Sickbay.

Stardate 5931.7, Interbase Memo
From: Supply Officer Carrera
To: Base Commander Mendez

SIR, WHEN YOU INFORMED ME OF THE SITUATION YOU WARNED ME TO EXPECT EXTRAORDINARY REQUISITIONS, BUT I AM NOT CERTAIN JUST HOW 'EXTRAORDINARY' YOU MEANT. I HAVE JUST GOTTEN A HAND-WRITTEN NOTE FROM THE APPARENT CAPTAIN OF THE ANARCHISTS REQUIRING TWO

DOZEN SYSTEMS-RELAY MODULES, ONE DOZEN HEAVY-DUTY SUPPORT-ROD BLANKS, USE OF ONE HALF-DOZEN PORTABLE FORCE-FIELD GENERATORS, AND TWENTY TONS OF ICE. OBSERVING THE CRAFT IN QUESTION, I NOTE THAT THE ANARCHISTS HAVE DETACHED THE PRIMARY AND SECONDARY HULLS, THE NACELLES AND THEIR SUPPORTS, ARE HOLDING THE DETACHED PARTS IN PROXIMITY WITH MOORING CABLES, AND HAVE BEGUN STRIPING ONE OF THE NACELLE-SUPPORTS DOWN TO ITS STRUTS. I HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THEY'RE UP TO. SHOULD I FILL THE REQUISITION?

Mendez to Carrera:

YOU HAVE YOUR ORDERS. GIVE THEM WHAT THEY NEED. REMEMBER, THEY'RE FROM AN ALIEN CULTURE AND IT'S THE GALILEI THAT THEY'RE TRYING TO REPAIR. TRY NOT TO SHOW UNDUE ASTONISHMENT AT THEIR METHODS.

Carrera to Mendez:

WILL COMPLY, BUT I FEEL OBLIGED TO POINT OUT THAT IF THE GALILEI AND THE ENTERPRISE CONTINUE TO REQUISITION MATERIALS AT THEIR PRESENT RATE, WE WILL BE STRIPPED TO THE WALLS IN THREE WEEKS.

Mendez to Carrera:

SUPPLY SHIPS ARE DUE IN TWO WEEKS IF NOT SOONER. NO OTHER SHIPS WILL APPROACH THE BASE UNTIL THE GALILEI IS DONE. GIVE OUR GUESTS WHAT THEY ASK FOR AND KEEP QUIET.

"No mistake, Jim. No mistake." McCoy's eyes were steady, but his voice shook a little. "If those weird spores could even turn Spock into a -- a 'lotus eater', they'll do the same to Jenneth's people. No, I don't think it's any damn mistake."

"How...clever." The look on Kirk's face was scaring McCoy. "A nice safe dumping-ground for people who complain too much. Cheaper than prisons and surer than brain-washing. The perfect trap."

"Jim..." McCoy was too intent on Kirk to notice that someone had just entered the adjacent lab, close enough to overhear.

"And even if they could avoid that, the transporter's set to break down, so they can't go back to the ship. Or even if they do go back to the Galilei, the ole wreck's too worn out to take them anywhere else. Three choices: they become nice, safe lotus-eaters, or the Bertholdt rays kill them, or they're stuck for life on the ship, orbiting forever... No! Not for them! I won't do it! I won't be Starfleet's goddam Judas Goat! Komack can take those orders and shove them--"

"Jim, there's gotta be some way around this. I haven't seen the orders, but you said they were contradictory..."

"They were pretty damn specific about the co-ordinates of the planet! ...Of course, I could always make a 'mistake' about one of the numbers -- a big enough mistake to lead them to a safe world, maybe out on the Rim, where Starfleet doesn't go very often or look very closely..."

"That might be hard to pull off. It's a long way to the Rim, and traffic has picked up the last couple of months, ever since they discovered dilithium deposits out there. There's too much chance of running into some other ship, and the word would get back to Starfleet pretty quickly."

"Or I could get them to Earth, find one of those 'backward' areas where the Edenites and other malcontents hang out, and let them go ahead and stir up 'social problems'. Serve Fed-Central right if they started a whole damn revolution!"

"Jim, calm down! Think: you couldn't get them anywhere near Earth without Starfleet's knowledge; and if all the authorities are unanimous about keeping Jenneth's people off Earth, that means they're worried enough to shoot on sight if you try it. You might get everyone killed that way! At the very least, Jen's people would be rounded up and forcibly rehabilitated; it might not last, but it sure wouldn't make them any freer or happier. In any case, Starfleet would nail your ass to a tree. You might wind up getting rehabilitated yourself!"

"They've already done that," Kirk growled, eyes narrowed to green-lighted slits. "It didn't last on me, either."

"Jim, what are you talking about?" McCoy stared at him.

"Hmm? Oh..." Kirk frowned. "The usual bull they preach you in the Academy and prep school, about the Federation's noble intentions and incorruptibility and all that. You know how the old song goes: 'When I think back on all the crap I learned in high school, it's a wonder I can think at all.'"

"What old song? I never heard it." McCoy didn't take his eyes off Kirk. What have they done to you, Jim?

"You haven't? Hmm, not surprising. It's very old."

"Did you get it from Jenneth?"

"I don't know, but never mind that. Back to the point. What the hell can I do that stands a good chance of success? Give me some ideas, Bones."

"Oh, damn..." McCoy slumped in his chair, rubbing his forehead. "The only other thing I can think of is to tell Jenneth the truth, let her people run for it and take their own chances. There'd be all kinds of ways to keep Starfleet from finding out where they're going, or who told them. They'd have a fighting chance, and you'd be in the clear."

Kirk thought awhile and gave a long sigh. "It may just come to that," he said. "Their ship would have to be good enough to give them a decent getaway..." He glanced at McCoy and smiled. "You know, you're turning into a good conspirator in your old age, Bones."

"Huh? Me?"

"Yes, you. That suggestion of yours is as gorgeously illegal as anything I thought up. Heh! Maybe you've been hanging around with the Anarchists too long." Kirk winked, got up and walked out, leaving the doctor to think that one over.

"Damn!" whispered McCoy, feeling cold. "Maybe I should run a psychotricorder reading on myself!" He glanced toward the lab, wondering if he'd left the machine in there--

--and saw Christine Chapel standing in the doorway, giving him a long calculating look.

"Oh my lord... Chris, how long have you been there?"

"Long enough." She stepped into the office, sat down in the chair Kirk had vacated, took McCoy's wrists and gently stopped him from beating his fists on his forehead. "No, Leonard, it isn't just the Captain. We've all been affected. Dealing with Jenneth's people, in this universe or that one, has made us all reconsider a lot of things."

"We're turning into shipful of mutineers!"

"No: adults."

"Huh?"

Christine got up and fetched the brandy from what McCoy had thought was his secret hiding-place, took out two of the thick graduated columns that McCoy used for glasses, poured them both half-full and handed one to him. He noted belatedly, as she sat down, that she was wearing that efficient technician's jumpsuit she'd affected for the last month; it was oddly becoming in a tough, no-nonsense sort of way. Strange that he hadn't really noticed before.

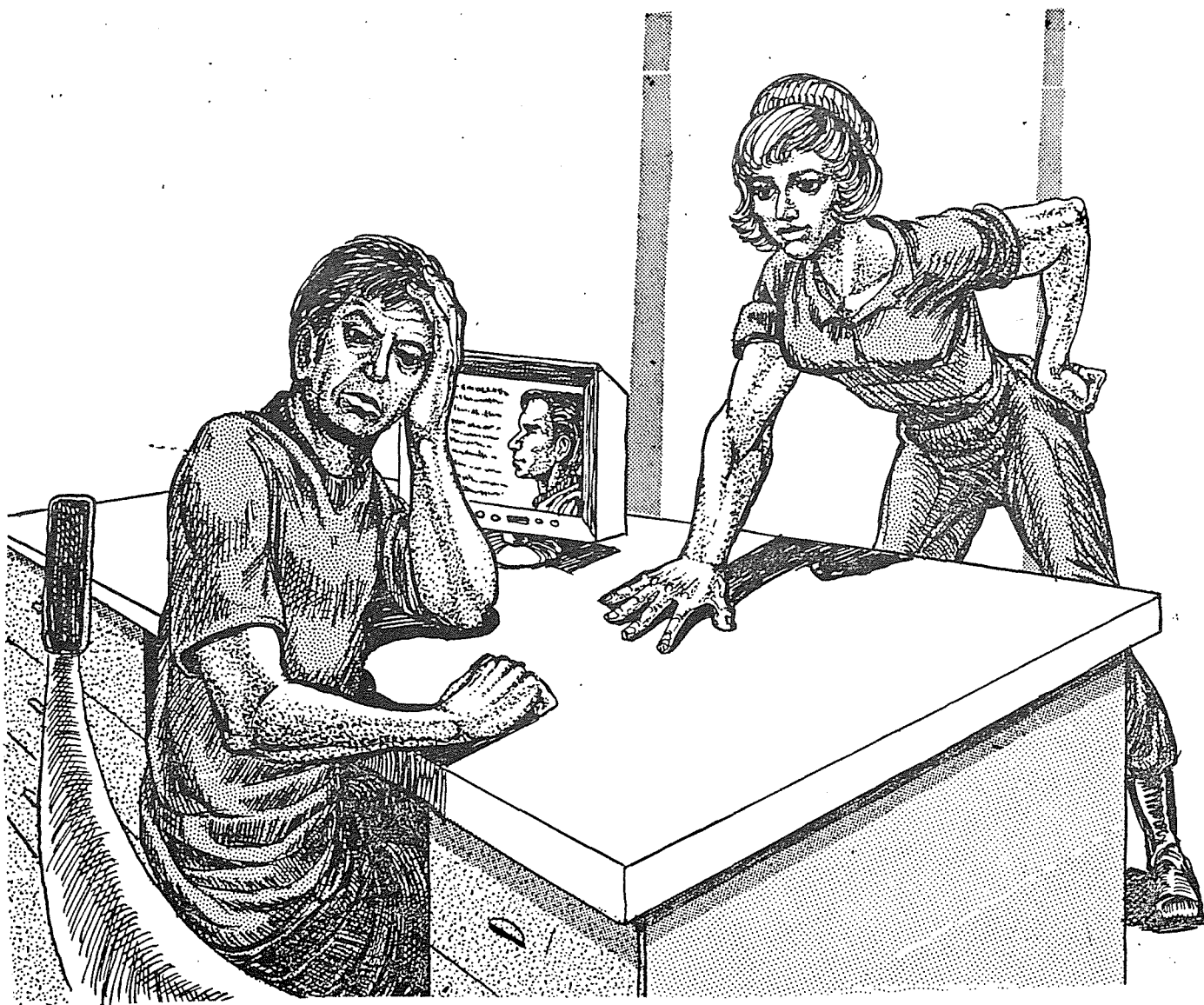
"Consider, Doctor," she said, settling back on the chair, "That only a child believes that his parents -- or any adults -- are all-knowing, all-powerful and all-benign. Too many of us are in the habit of picturing the Federation that way. Perhaps it's because we live in a self-enclosed world on this ship, wandering everywhere, staying nowhere, never long enough

in one place to contact the realities of a settled life under the average Federation government. Oh, we lock horns with officials now and then, but rarely enough that we can think such troubles are unusual."

She flicked a loose lock of hair out of her eyes. Her hair style too was much looser, less fussy and more efficient than if it had been before this whole adventure started. "Settled people know better; I wish I had a credit for every time I've heard land-side friends complain about the local authorities! Most such grumblers think their trouble is nothing but local, and that other people are better off. 'The grass is always greener', and all that! Some people have more sense, because they've tried other places and know that it's the same everywhere. That's where Edenites come from, and People for Temporal Control, and god knows who else."

"Chris..." McCoy tried, weakly, "Is everybody turning paranoid or is it just me?"

"It's not paranoia, Doctor; we're all growing up." Christine smiled. It was a bolder, surer, easier smile than McCoy remembered. "The Anarchists didn't do it knowingly. All they did was show us, by contrast, what our lives are really like. Having to 'play Anarchist' for their benefit made us reconsider our own values, our beliefs."



"Gawd..."

"We're learning, finally, that no rule is perfect. Nobody is incapable of making mistakes, not even Federation officials, and having legal power only makes the mistakes further-reaching. Power still corrupts, Leonard, no matter how good the user's intentions are. There is no Big Daddy who can be trusted absolutely. Sorry." She leaned forward and patted his shoulder. "It's a good thing that there's an exception to every rule, because all rules are questionable."

"That's enough, Nurse! I refuse to listen to any more of this---"

"Oh, stuff it. You just told Captain Kirk how to defy Starfleet orders and get away with it; that makes you a damn sight more 'outinous' than I am."

"Unh..." McCoy opened his mouth, shut it again, and reached for the brandy. "All right, all right," he conceded, "Starfleet's made a real mistake on this one, and we've all bent the rules more than once. I still think Jim's overdoing it, and I'm worried about him."

"He's simply had more time to think it over -- and more reason to think -- than we've had." Christine refilled her glass and raised it in a cheery salute.

"No, no, it's Jenneth!" McCoy insisted. "That damned mind-link -- Her subconscious is bleeding over into his, subtly altering his personality--"

"But that wouldn't change anything. They have the same personality. Haven't you noticed? The only difference is that she does what he only dreams about."

"Then he's losing control! She's urging him on to do all sorts of things he'd never do on his own! Why -- why, look at that song he just quoted; where else would he have heard it?"

"In high school, just as I did." Christine smiled sweetly into McCoy's drop-jawed stare. "It's an old folksong we used to sing when we were feeling rebellious."

"Well, all adolescents feel rebellious at times, but adults--"

"Bull." Christine put down her drink and transfixed McCoy with a cool gray stare. "That's not true of all human societies-- or even most of them, if you'll bother to study historical or anthropological surveys. It only occurs in societies that are rigid, over-structured and over-controlled. Children think their elders are all-wise, adolescents know better and rebel against them, adults give up trying and simply go along with things as they are-- until they see a good chance to escape."

"Oh, wonderful!" McCoy snapped, defensively clutching his glass. "So Jim's regressed to the adolescent stage! Just lovely. God knows just how much work it'll take to make him grow up again, though I suppose you think we shouldn't even try."

"How much work? I wonder..." Christine grew suddenly thoughtful. "Do you have any idea what he meant by that comment about having been rehabilitated before, as an adolescent?"

"No, I don't..." Now it was McCoy's turn to frown thoughtfully. "I don't think there's more to it than just high-school prep talks... Where could he have gotten that? Jenneth couldn't have put it into his head."

"Can you pull his personal history file? Or does Spock have that locked off too?" Despite the jarring comment, Christine didn't look resentful; she had that tense/absorbed expression that she habitually wore when she was hot on the trail of something important.

"No, I've got that on tape in the psych-department safe..." Not sure why, McCoy began to catch some of her urgency. "No, wait a minute. I've got it over here; I was looking at it yesterday. Uhuh...Here we go." He dropped the tape into

the desk-console and turned on the viewscreen. "Do you have any idea what we're looking for, Chris?"

"He mentioned prep school..." Christine manipulated dials and buttons, eyes riveted to the screen. "Hah! That's something: not your average education. What was he doing in military school at the age of twelve?"

"Uh, probably giving himself the best possible chance for Starfleet. With his character, he probably wanted to be a Starship Captain from the time he was a child."

"Hmm, true. This school is famous for 'feeding' graduates into Starfleet Academy. A lot of its better students get summer positions as midshipmen... Hey! I'll bet that's what he was doing on Tarsus IV during the Kodos dictatorship!"

"Maybe that's it. For a 14-year-old-boy, living through a famine and a dictatorship and a massacre could be pretty traumatic." McCoy relaxed considerably. "No doubt he got some psychiatric treatment afterward, along with the rest of the survivors. Yes, that's probably it; he just associated the treatment with the tyranny and massacre. Not surprising that he'd still be upset about it. Remember how he reacted when he finally caught up with Kodos!"

"Wait." Christine pointed to another line of print on the screen. "There. Look. Shortly before he went to military school: 'arrested for juvenile misdemeanor, convicted, released to parental custody'. What do you make of that?"

"Heh! I take that to mean Jim Kirk was a young rascal who pulled a few pranks and was officially scolded for it. Oh, I remember some adolescent pranks of my own! The time we stole the watermelons and leaned them against half the front doors in the town -- ah, the sheriff made us collect every last one of them and put them back, but he was laughing all the way..."

"Doctor, your parents didn't send you to military school for that prank. I don't think Jim Kirk's parents did it for such a small thing as that."

"Er, just one parent: his father was dead by then. But if he'd wanted to go to military school anyway, his mother might have thought that was just the thing for him."

"I still doubt that it was for stealing watermelons." Christine raised her head and looked fixedly at McCoy. "There's an oddity that's been bothering me ever since I finally got around to viewing those tapes about the Ekos incident, and it just now started to make sense. Leonard, where did Captain James T. Kirk learn to pick pockets?"

"Uh... You think it was that?" McCoy ran a hand through his hair. "But he could've learned it at Starfleet Academy, in one of the Survival courses. They teach some of the damndest things in the Command Department..." Picking pockets...

"Ask Chekov or Sulu if they know how to pick pockets."

"All right, all right! So a wild young kid snitches a hanky on a date and gets sent to military school to straighten out! What of it?"

"Precisely how would they 'straighten out' a 'wild young kid' like Jim Kirk?" Christine leaned over the desk, her eyes less than a foot from McCoy's. "Does this particular 'prep school' use psychological rehabilitation on students who need to be 'straightened out'?"

"Unh... I don't know." Oh, yes I do. Yes, they do. But...Jim?! "Well, it couldn't have been anything very, uh, intensive... What's the point of all this, anyway?"

"Just to show that there may very well be nothing at all 'wrong' with the Captain. He may be much more realistic about this whole situation than you give him credit for being."

"Spock doesn't think so!"

"Spock is prejudiced and even the Captain can see it. Why do you think he brought this current problem to you, and not to Spock?"

"Wh-why, he... Maybe he... What do you mean, 'prejudiced'?"

"I mean that Spock treats Jenneth's people as if they were a-- a social disease which the Captain is in danger of catching. I've seen some of his reports and recommendations, never mind how, and I've seen the way he behaves when Jenneth's people are around. Have you noticed that he always tries to position himself between them and the Captain? He doesn't want to let them near Jim Kirk again! He doing his damndest to have them sent away someplace-- no matter if it's to a far-off world or a re-hab-center-- where the Captain will never have to see, hear or think about them again."

"Well, of course he's concerned about Jim's health..."

"'Concern' my bloody blue blisters! He's possessive-- and jealous. Look at the way he acts towards Quannechota! Spock doesn't want any of them to be emotionally closer to the Captain than he is, and the only way to prevent that is to send them far out of reach and make sure they'll never come back."

"Wha-- Jeal-- You-- You wait right here! I'm going to get the psychotricorder and do a reading on you this very minute! If that isn't a display of galloping paranoia--"

"Fine. Get it. While you're at it, do a reading on yourself-- for a gross case of 'selective inattention'. And if you can catch him, do a reading on Spock, too."

"Uhhh... Well, er... it wouldn't prove much; all our readings are off, thanks to the 'convergence effect'... Dammit, Christine, he's a Vulcan! Vulcans can't feel such a human emotion as jealousy!"

"Nonsense. A species that kills its own kind to win a mate is damn-well capable of jealousy-- and possessiveness. Besides, Mr. Spock is half Human. Strange that you, of all people, should forget that."

"But... he wouldn't..." Jim. Quannechota. The Rite of Saturn. Full Moon... "But it's Jenneth! It's Jenneth that he wants! All those excuses he makes to be with her, the way he watches her--"

"And at the same time he wants to send her as far out of reach as possible. That too should tell you something."

"Oh, damn." McCoy put his elbows on the desk and leaned his face on his hands. "Go away, Christine. Just go away."

Stardate 5934.3, Starbase #12 to Enterprise:

GALILEI MAKING FIRST TEST FLIGHT AT 2130 HOURS TODAY. YOU ARE TO ACCOMPANY AND REPORT.

Stardate 5934.6, Enterprise to Starbase #12:

GALILEI TEST FLIGHT ABORTED AT 2146, WHEN SHIFT INTO WARP-DRIVE OCCASIONED FOURTEEN SEPARATE AND DISTINCT SYSTEMS BREAKDOWNS, INCLUDING LIFE-SUPPORT. GOOD THING JENNETH'S PEOPLE WERE ALL WEARING SPACE-SUITS. RETURNING TO BASE FOR REPAIRS.

Stardate 5936.4, Supply Officer Carrera to Mendez:

PLEASE GIVE EXACT E.T.A. OF SUPPLY CONVOY. ENTERPRISE REPAIRS MORE EXTENSIVE THAN EXPECTED, AND GALILEI'S REQUISITIONS MUST BE SEEN TO BE BELIEVED. BESIDES STRIPING US OF PARTS, THE ANARCHISTS ARE EATING US OUT OF HOUSE AND HOME. HAVE YOU SEEN THE EXTRA, NON-REGULATION BRACING THEY'VE BEEN ADDING TO THE GALILEI?

Stardate 5937.3, Commodore Mendez to Enterprise:

REGRET TO INTERRUPT YOUR REPAIR SCHEDULE, BUT SECOND GALILEI TEST FLIGHT DUE TO COMMENCE AT 1120 TODAY. YOU ARE ONLY SHIP AVAILABLE TO ACCOMPANY AND REPORT. SORRY.

Stardate 5937.4, Enterprise to Mendez:

GALILEI TEST FLIGHT #2 ABORTED AT 1251, WHEN ATTEMPTED 'DRAG RACE' WITH ENTERPRISE OCCASIONED BREAKAWAY OF CARGO-CANISTER. SUBSEQUENT CHASE THEREOF OCCASIONED FOUR MAJOR SYSTEMS BREAKDOWNS AND ELEVEN MINOR ONES. RETURNING TO BASE FOR REPAIRS AND REST.

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Stardate 5939.7, Personnel Officer Piacelli to Commodore Mendez:

ANARCHISTS CAUSING THREE SERIOUS PERSONNEL PROBLEMS TO DATE: A) THEIR REQUESTS FOR MANPOWER ARE CAUSING PERSONNEL SHORTAGES ON THE BASE: B) BASE PERSONNEL HAVE LEARNED THAT THEY CANNOT BE PROPERLY DISCIPLINED WHILE IN ANARCHISTS' PRESENCE, AND THEREFORE REMAIN IN THEIR COMPANY AS MUCH AS POSSIBLE, PICKING UP BAD HABITS: C) SAID FRATERNIZATION INCLUDES BEDROOM ACTIVITIES, WHICH HAS CAUSED AN EPIDEMIC OF YEAST INFECTIONS. DR. CHOVVA ASKS HOW SAID INFECTIONS ESCAPED ATTENTION OF ENTERPRISE MEDICAL OFFICER: THESE PEOPLE WERE SUPPOSED TO BE SANITIZED BEFORE THEY WERE BROUGHT HERE. DISCIPLINE IS SUFFERING NOTABLE BREAKDOWN, NOT CRITICAL, BUT REQUIRING SPECIAL ATTENTION.

Stardate 5940.4, Mendez to Kirk:

JIM, I HATE TO BOTHER YOU, BUT THE GALILEI'S GOING OUT AGAIN THIS MORNING AT 1050. THE ENTERPRISE IS THE ONLY SHIP AROUND THAT CAN KEEP UP WITH HER. SORRY.

Stardate 5940.6, Kirk to Mendez:

GALILEI'S TEST RUN #3 ABORTED AT 1248 WHEN, ATTEMPTING AN EXTENDED BARREL-ROLL AROUND THE ENTERPRISE, SHE SUFFERED BREAKDOWN OF GRAVITY-COMPENSATORS, SHIP'S GYROCOMPASS, BRIDGE NAVIGATIONAL CONTROLS AND NINE MINOR SYSTEMS. REFUSING HELP, HER CREW WENT TO AUXILIARY CONTROL, CALCULATED THE ROUTE HOME 'BY HAND', AND ATTEMPTED TO RACE US BACK TO BASE. WE ARE RETURNING FOR REPAIRS, REST AND RECREATION. IS IT REALLY NECESSARY TO SEND US OUT WITH THEM ON EVERY RUN? OUR PRESENCE SEEMS TO ENCOURAGE THEM TO SHOW OFF: THEIR SHOWING OFF CAUSES UNNECESSARY BREAKDOWNS, BREAKDOWNS REQUIRE MORE REPAIRS, REPAIRS CONSUME MORE OF YOUR SUPPLIES AND EXTEND THEIR VISITING TIME. HAVE A HEART, JOSE!

Stardate 5942.7, Food-Supply Officer Holversson to Commodore Mendez:

SIR, THERE ARE NOW SEVERAL UNKNOWN PERSONS WITH ACCESS TO THE LIQUOR CLOSET, AND THE SUPPLIES ARE DISAPPEARING RAPIDLY. I HAVE RESET THE LOCK SEVERAL TIMES, BUT NOTHING I DO SEEMS TO PLUG THE LEAK. HAVE YOU ANY IDEAS ON HOW TO PREVENT THIS BEVERAGE PILFERAGE?

X Stardate 5944.4, Mendez to Kirk:

JIM, I'M SORRY ABOUT THIS, BUT THE GALILEI'S GOING OUT AGAIN IN HALF AN HOUR, AND KOMACK'S OFFICE STILL DOESN'T WANT HER GOING OFF ALONE. I'LL SEND IN A REALLY FORCEFUL REQUEST WHEN YOU GET BACK, BUT I'M AFRAID YOU'LL HAVE TO NURSEMAID THE GALILEI ONE MORE TIME.

Stardate 5944.5, Kirk to Mendez:

GALILEI TEST FLIGHT ABORTED AT 1906 DUE TO LIFE-SUPPORT FAILURE AND LOSS OF ATMOSPHERE ON DECK 9, PLUS FOUR MINOR BREAKDOWNS, OCCASIONED DURING TRACTOR-BEAM TUG-OF-WAR WITH THE ENTERPRISE. SHE WAS WINNING, TOO. WE ARE RETURNING TO BASE FOR REPAIRS, REST, RECREATION AND MINOR MEDICAL TREATMENT. JOSE, I SWEAR THIS HAD BETTER BE THE LAST OF IT.

Stardate 5945.9, Base Security Chief Dubrovnik to Commodore Mendez:

SIR, I WILL RESIGN IF A METHOD IS NOT FOUND TO PREVENT THE ANARCHISTS AND THEIR FRIENDS FROM SNAKE-DANCING DOWN THE CORRIDORS AFTER HOURS SINGING 'MOMMA'S GOT A SQUEEZE-BOX' AT THE TOP OF THEIR LUNGS.

Stardate 5948.4, Commodore Mendez to All Hands:

THE GALILEI WILL DEPART AT 1045 THIS MORNING ON HER FIRST SOLO FLIGHT. CONDITION YELLOW ALERT. PLEASE CLEAR THE DOCKING AREA. SET SHIELDS TO MAXIMUM. RESCUE TUGS #5, #6, AND #7, STAND BY FOR FURTHER ORDERS.

Stardate 5948.6, Captain Leekwang to Commodore Mendez:

SUPPLY CONVOY REQUESTS PERMISSION TO DOCK AND UNLOAD. I THINK WE SPOTTED YOUR PROBLEM CHILD 1.8 PARSECS OUT, GOING THROUGH SOME KIND OF PRACTICE-DRILL. WE EXPENDED MUCH ENERGY ON CLOAKING THE CONVOY, WHICH IS WHY WE'RE A BIT LATE, BUT I'M SURE

THEY DIDN'T SEE US. WHAT THE HELL ARE THOSE EXTRA ATTACHMENTS THEY'VE ADDED ONTO THE OLD CRATE?

Stardate 5948.9, Mendez to All Hands:

THE GALILEI IS RETURNING. REPEAT: THE GALILEI IS RETURNING, AND IN ONE PIECE. CONDITION YELLOW ALERT. PLEASE CLEAR AND SHIELD THE DOCKING AREA. NO CELEBRATION IS REQUIRED AT THIS TIME. REPEAT: PLEASE GET THE HELL OFF THE DOCKING AREA.

Roantree to Kirk, Wherever You Can Find Him:

JIM, IT WORKED BEAUTIFULLY! ONLY THREE BREAKDOWNS, AND ALL OF THEM MINOR. WE'RE GETTING THERE. SCOTTY'S OVER HERE ON BASE-DECK 23, GETTING PROPERLY CONGRATULATED. COME JOIN THE PARTY. OH, ON THE WAY OVER, TRY TO FIND OUT WHY THE SUPPLIES THAT CAME IN FOR US DIDN'T INCLUDE ANY LIVESTOCK FOR THE COLONY.

Stardate 5949.6, Officer of the day Barapranda to Commodore Mendez:

WRECKAGE FROM LAST NIGHT'S CELEBRATION WILL TAKE 2.5 DAYS, AT LEAST, TO CLEAN UP. HAVE DISCOVERED MARIJUANA GROWING IN THE HYDROPONICS SECTION AND ARBORETUM, WHICH ANARCHISTS SHAMELESSLY ADMIT HAVING PLANTED. WHEN ARE THEY LEAVING?

"... and this isn't a bad night-spot for a Starbase. Nothing like Wrigley's, of course-- but then, what is?" McCoy took a cautious swig from his drink: a tall tulip-glass full of seven brightly-colored fluids in seven distinct layers. It wasn't as devastating as it looked; three of the seven were plain, unfermented fruit juices. "Then again, they say that Argellius comes close."

"We didn't get to see much of Argellius," Kirk recalled, bemusedly swirling his green-filled shot glass. "Next time we get leave there we've got to see for ourselves if it's true..." He frowned abruptly.

"Something the matter?" McCoy didn't seem to pounce, though he'd been watching Kirk intently all evening. "Find a fly in your Green Sky?"

"'Fly in the ointment' more exactly." Kirk managed a half-hearted smile. "I just remembered that our mission's ending. Only god and Starfleet know where we'll be stationed. I don't know when-- or if-- we'll see Argellius together."

"We'll manage." Damn! Starfleet couldn't have picked a worse time to drop this on him! "Look, Starfleet Command isn't staffed entirely by idiots; they know better than to break up a good team." ...I'll send another report to that effect...along with the crew psych-profile updates... "Hell, you know I'd sign on anywhere they send you."

"Thanks, Bones." Kirk's smile brightened. "Can't tell you how much I appreciate that."

"It's the least I can do." Where else would I go, anyway? "Besides, you seem to have an unerring nose for the best entertainment spots. Yo-ho-ho! I'll follow you to the ends of the galaxy-- and into the best bars in the universe. Cheers!" McCoy demolished another level of his drink. "From the rumors I've heard, most of the crew wants to stay with you. After this mission, a lot of them have enough time put in to rate that option."

"You know, I haven't been asking..."

"You don't have to. When the orders come through, the crew will be lined up at your door to volunteer."

"Good to know. ...Well, we have a few weeks before anyone has to worry about it. Just one more task to finish..."

McCoy began to wish he'd slipped a euphoric into Kirk's drink. "Can't you forget about that for awhile? We're on leave, remember?"

"Sorry. Just force of habit." Kirk leaned back in his chair, took a leisurely swallow of his Green Sky, and carefully made himself relax. "And maybe it's from carrying heavy secrets too long."

"You've got to drop that weight sometime, Jim."

"Fine. On whom?"

"Waal, you could start by unloading a little of it on your old family doctor." McCoy edged closer, dropping his voice by a barely perceptible fraction. "I take it, uhm, you've decided what to do about Jenneth's people and their ...new home."

"Uhhh." Kirk briefly glanced around him, managing not to look conspiratorial. "Let's say, it's easy to mistake a 3 for an 8 in a list of co-ordinates, especially if the paper has gotten slightly dirty or smeared. And there's a border closer than the Rim."

"True, true. I know nothing about navigation, of course," McCoy grinned past his glass. "But I've seen enough cases of medical orders getting smeared, mixed up, or otherwise mistaken. I'll vouch for that. No doubt Spock will, too. And Scotty..."

"I haven't told Spock." Kirk emptied his glass. "The fewer people who know about this, the better."

McCoy shaped a soundless whistle. Not told Spock?

Just then Kirk's communicator bleeped. With a heartfelt oath, he pulled it out and acknowledged. McCoy couldn't hear what the message was, but he saw Kirk snap taut and pale, and he guessed that it meant big trouble. Kirk slid out of his seat, waved McCoy after him, led the way quickly out of the bar and down the corridor.

"What's wrong?" McCoy panted, trying to keep up with Kirk without running. "Where're we going?"

"Back to the Enterprise, fast." Kirk ducked into an empty elevator bay, pulled McCoy close beside him and pressed the emergency beam-up signal. "The Galilei went out four hours ago on another test-run, and hasn't come back. A Courier two parsecs out just reported sighting her -- on course for Earth. We've got to stop her before Starfleet does."

The transporter hum drowned out McCoy's reaction.

Project Tape R-262, Roantree recording:

EVERYTHING'S A-OK, AND WE'VE DECIDED TO CUT LOOSE AND GO ALL THE WAY --BACK TO EARTH. NAVIGATION CHANNEL SOUNDS ALL CLEAR; NO TRAFFIC JAMS AHEAD. WE'VE SENT A MESSAGE BACK TO STARBASE #12 TO TELL THEM WE'RE GOING. ALL SYSTEMS ARE GO.

HIGH TIME WE SAW HOME AGAIN! ALL THE WORK ON THE SHIP KEPT US TOO BUSY TO THINK, FOR AWHILE, BUT NOW THE SHIP'S FLYING RIGHT WE'VE HAD SOME TIME TO REMEMBER HOW HOMESICK WE ARE. WE EXPECT TO SPEND A FEW WEEKS AT HOME, FIND ALL OUR RELATIVES AND FRIENDS, SEE HOW HIGH HARBOR LOOKS NOW, AND GENERALLY CATCH UP ON THE CHANGES. MY CHILDREN ARE GONE, BUT MAYBE SPARKS... HAVEN'T EVEN THOUGHT TO HUNT THROUGH THE BASE'S COMPUTERS FOR WORD OF HIM! TOO BUSY TO THINK, I GUESS; TOO OVERWHELMED. THE GALILEI'S COMPUTER IS A DISGRACE -- COULDN'T USE IT TO FIND YOUR NOSE, LET ALONE YOUR RELATIVES -- BUT THAT WON'T MATTER ONCE WE REACH EARTH. WE CAN ALWAYS REFILL THE MEMORY-BANKS FROM THE LIBRARY. IT'LL BE STRANGE TO SEE THE LIBRARY STILL STANDING.

WE'RE WONDERING HOW MANY PEOPLE BACK HOME WOULD LIKE TO COME TO THIS NEW PLANET OF OURS. WE CAN FIND OUT WHILE WE'RE HOME, MAYBE, EVEN PICK UP THE FIRST BATCH. THEN WE CAN GO BACK TO STARBASE #12 TO PICK UP THE CARRIER -- AND MAKE THE FIRST RUN OUT TO THE NEW HOME. WE COULD LEAVE THE FIRST LOAD OF SETTLERS AND MATERIAL THERE, THEN COME BACK FOR MORE. WE MIGHT MAKE A REGULAR RUN OF IT, TRANSPORTING FOLK AND GOODS -- MAYBE EVEN EXPAND INTO A PERPETUAL EARTH/NEW-HOME TRADE RUN...

OH, THE SKY'S THE LIMIT! I COULD SING ALL THE WAY HOME!

Kirk bolted through the turbolift doors, cleared the steps in one stride, and slammed into the command-chair a split second after Spock evacuated it. "Helm!" he bellowed, "Follow the Galilei's course, Warp 6!" Sulu obeyed instantly, and

the ship lunged forward. McCoy, just coming out of the lift, grabbed the railing. "Uhura," Kirk continued, "Throw all available power into the navigational channel, and try to contact the Galilei. Spock, divert all power to the forward sensors and find that ship." He glared at the screen and galloped his fingers on the arm of the chair while the others complied.

"They are still out of sensor range," Spock reported, "Though there is a clear ion-trail which could only have come from a Transport-sized ship. The dispersal-pattern is still tight, indicating that the ship passed this way within the last four hours and at a speed not above warp four. If conditions do not change, we may expect to overtake the Galilei within 2.187 hours. At that time she will still be well outside her sensor-range of Earth."

Kirk nodded acknowledgment without taking his eyes off the screen.

"Sir," Uhura informed him, "I can't reach them on the navigational channel. It's just too far."

"Very well. Restore normal reception," Kirk replied, only giving her half his attention. He hadn't really expected radio contact; the navigational channel was broad and strong, working on super-light and sub-light frequencies, but its range was short enough to require boost-and-transfer stations at every parsec. Kirk strongly doubted that the Starbase 12 personnel had told Jenneth's people about the stations, much less how to use them. "Damned idiots..." he murmured. Spock raised an eyebrow, assuming that Kirk meant the Anarchists.

"Sir," Uhura announced, "There's a call on Starfleet channel #1 -- from Admiral Komack, Sir."

Damn! Last thing I need... "Very well. Put him on. Audio only."

"Yessir."

A burst of static filled the speakers, and then a raucous voice. "Kirk? Kirk! This is Admiral Komack speaking. Give me visual, damnit!"

"I can't, Admiral. We're using the screen to hunt for the Galilei. Do you have any reports on her position?"

"Not yet, damnit. Will soon, though. I've got half the ships in the quadrant out looking for her. This is your fault, Kirk! You were supposed to keep a close eye on those savages! How the hell did you let them get away from you?"

"She didn't get away from me; she got away from the base while on another practice run." Kirk rubbed his eyes with one hand while the other made unconscious strangling motions. "If you'll recall, she's been allowed to go out unaccompanied before on such runs. No one expected that this time she wouldn't come back."

"Who let them go out alone? Damn it, I'll have Mendez' hide for authorizing that!"

"Permission was granted from your office, Sir. I didn't see the order and don't know who signed it."

"I'll find out. It's still your responsibility, Kirk! You're the only one who can handle those creatures, and you'd better do it fast! Under no circumstances can they land on Earth! Do you understand me, Mister?"

"Understood, Admiral," Kirk droned, his fingers digging into the arm rest as if it were Komack's neck. "At our current speed we'll overtake the Galilei in less than three hours."

"That's not good enough, damnit! I want her stopped now!"

"We'll hail them as soon as we get within range, Admiral. If I can contact Jenneth Roantree I can talk her into--"

"Within range? You should be within hailing range right now! Why haven't you stopped that ship?"

"Because the Galilei has nothing but intraship and navigation channel -- by your own orders, Admiral!" Kirk snapped.

"Also, nobody informed them about navigational relay stations -- again, by your orders." No proof of that, but it's a good guess... "I can't call the Galilei for another two hours, at least, because she's ninety percent deaf and dumb -- thank you, Sir."

There was a full ten seconds of silence while the Admiral thought up a comeback. What he finally managed was neither original or apt. "It's still your responsibility, Kirk! You should've been watching for something like this! Now you go get that ship, and you go get it fast, and you bring it right back to Starbase 12, and if she won't stop and come back then you are hereby ordered to shoot her down. Is that perfectly clear?"

"Perfectly clear, Sir." Kirk's eyes were narrowed to slits; it was a good thing the Admiral couldn't see his expression. "Have you given the same to all the other pursuing ships?"

"Yes, I have, dammit! Now carry out your orders. Komack out."

The speaker crackled and went silent. In the ensuing quiet, Kirk calmly recited a few choice comments concerning the Admiral's parentage, intelligence, sexual habits and personal hygiene. Nobody dared to react, though Chekov surreptitiously took notes.

"Hell," Kirk finished turning to Spock. "Can you find out what other ships are within range? Tell me if any are likely to meet the Galilei before we do."

Spock questioned the computer and came up with an answer in 2.8 seconds. "The closest ship is the courier Pershing, which first noted the Galilei's new course. Given her starting position she should overtake the Galilei within... one hour and forty-one minutes, Captain."

"God, not the Pershing!" Kirk swore, slamming his hand on the arm-rest. "Captain Strickler's a rule-bound idiot, and hot-headed as well! Even the ship's name will give the game away... Hold it. If the Pershing reported the Galilei sighting just, hah, ten minutes ago, why will it take him so long to catch her?"

"Apparently Captain Strickler actually sighted her sometime earlier, but saw nothing unusual in the Galilei's presence and did not mention the sighting to Starfleet until his regular report, meanwhile continuing on his previous course. This delay gave the Anarchists their hour-and-a-half lead."

"Phew! Bless his mechanical little heart; there's still a chance. Uhura, contact the Pershing."

"Yessir!" Uhura's fingers scampered up and down the board. "Got him! He's too far for visual, Sir."

"Just as well. Put him on."

"Captain Strickler acknowledging." The dry waspish voice on the speaker was slightly distorted by interference. "To Enterprise, greetings."

"Greetings, yourself. "Strickler, this is Kirk. Do you have a fix on the Galilei?"

"We have confused sensor readings due to asteroidal debris in this area. However, at our current speed we expect to overtake the renegade ship in--"

"I know; hour and a half. She's not a renegade, Strickler; her crew simply isn't aware of what they're doing. She's flying deaf and dumb, on nothing but sensors and navigational channel. Listen: I can stop her once I get within communicating range. Cut speed and pull back. Let me talk to her first."

"I regret that I am unable to comply, Enterprise," droned Strickler. "I have direct orders from Admiral Komack to pursue, overtake and halt the Galilei with all possible speed."

"Strickler, she'll listen to me-- and she won't for you! I can stop her with a few words, but you'd have to fight her!"

Pull up and let me try to stop her peacefully!"

"I regret that I am unable to comply, Enterprise," repeated the exasperating voice. "My orders are clear, and allow no leeway."

"Strickler, use some common sense!" Kirk gambled. "You know what kind of armament a Transport carries. She's got two phaser banks, and you have only one. She's got more power reserves than you do, too. I know who's commanding that ship, and she'll swat you like a fly if you try to cross her. Pull back and let me deal with her, or you'll lose your ship!"

"Negative, Enterprise." The maddening voice was shot full of increasing static from the asteroid belt's interference, but the distinctly smug tone came through. "Admiral's orders include... information that the Galilei... unarmed... must proceed... ordered..."

"Sir, I've lost contact," Uhura reported.

"Damn!" Kirk pounded his fist on his knee. "We've got to get there first. Cut down that lead. Warp 8, Sulu -- for as long as we can safely hold it!"

"Aye, Sir!"

The Enterprise leaped ahead, engines howling.

TO: Admiral Komack, Starfleet Command.
FROM: Captain I.M. Strickler, USS Pershing.

HAVE OVERSHOT TARGET, WHICH APPEARS TO HAVE REDUCED SPEED, AND AM CIRCLING BACK. SENSOR CONTACT CONFIRMED. STAND BY.

"Annie, how's repairs on that damn shield?" Roantree asked, keeping an eye on the viewscreen even though the troublesome asteroid belt was past. As pilot, she sat at the helm. The command-chair was empty.

"Going slow," came a sour reply through her suit-radio. "Two of the motherless coils are burned out, and I only have replacements for one. The whole mechanism looks as if it's been through two wars and a revolution."

"It's only reasonable that the forward deflector shield would get more work than the rest put together. This ship usually doesn't fly sideways. Hmm, could you cannibalize parts from the other shields?"

"Maybe. Wait 'til we're finished checking 'em. Don't know yet if the asteroid belt chewed them up, too."

"I'll hold this speed until I hear from you. Out." Roantree slapped the suit-radio button, glanced at the other suited figures around the bridge and grinned wryly. "Well, that's not too bad," she announced. "This is the first bug we've found in the whole trip, and even that wouldn't have been a problem if we hadn't gone through that river of rocks."

The other mumbled chagrined agreement. A few offered suggestions, such as looking for nearby Alliance worlds and asking for replacement parts, or simply flying sideways until they reached Earth. In the middle of the discussion, Bailey called back and announced that all the other shields had both regular and emergency power, but all of them were worn and somewhat weakened. The forward shield could get no better than 30% regular power, if that. The one piece of good news was that the aft shield was as good as new.

"Nice to know that this ship has never been kicked in the butt," Roantree commented. The crew roared with laughter, and several people suggested turning the Galilei around and flying backwards.

"That may not be necessary," Quanna noted. "There is a ship approaching from ahead."

"Good. We can ask them for help. Full stop, everybody. Quanna, can you get a close-up? Ah, thanks. Somebody get on the horn to call them... Huh!? What kind of ship is that?"

The approaching vessel looked nothing like the Enterprise or the Galilei. It looked a little like a Tholian rhomboid ship, but was winged like a Romulan warbird. It was small, streamlined, obviously intended for planetary landings and take-offs, heavily engined and clearly quite fast. None of the library tapes the Anarchists could recall showed anything like this. No one had any idea what it was.

"Hold that message," Roantree waved a warning hand at Hot-Trot, who had slipped into the Communications chair. "Let's see what she does before we let her know we've got troubles."

The other ship slowed to a stop, uncomfortably close, even with the viewscreen registering normal magnification. On the hull, the ship's name became visible.

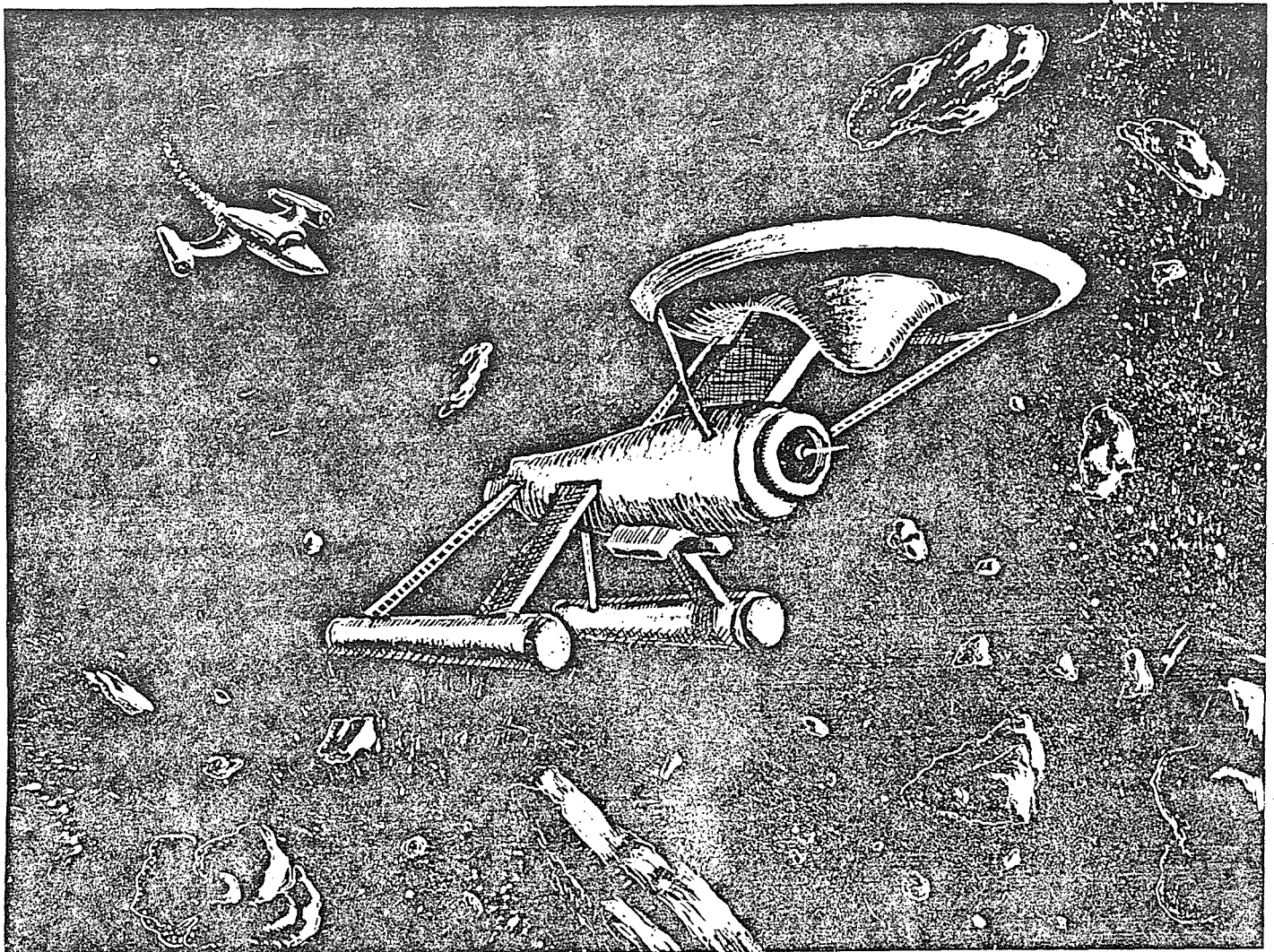
"...Pershing?" Hot-Trot wondered aloud. "Who'd name a ship after a bigoted old-time general?"

"I don't know," Roantree considered, "But I've got a bad feeling about this." With a few deft touches on the helm buttons, she turned the Galilei side-on to the other ship.

"He's sending," Hot-Trot announced. "Here, I'll put it on."

The loudspeakers crackled awake. "This is the Pershing, Captain Strickler speaking," said an unpleasant voice. "Turn ninety degrees to port and retrace your course with all possible speed."

"Huh?" said forty-one voices simultaneously.



"I repeat: turn ninety degrees to port and retrace your course at --"

"Wait a minute," Roantree snapped, fingers hovering over the full-shield buttons. "We've come a long way to see our relatives, and we're not turning back now. We have a slight mechanical problem that's slowing us down, and we'd like to trade with you for some spare parts, but if you can't help us, just say so, and we'll be on our way."

"You are capable of motion, and I am not authorized to give you spare parts. Please comply with the order. Turn--"

"'Order'?" gulped a dozen voices.

"Maybe he's from some religious 'order'," Roantree guessed. "Hey, Pershing, are we trespassing on the territory of a -- a monastery, or something like that?"

There was a moment's silence while Strickler tried to digest that one. "Negative," he finally replied. "You are defying direct orders. Turn ninety degrees to--"

"I think he's a nut," Hot-Trot claimed. "Or maybe he's from one of those tyrannies running loose in the galaxy."

"I don't know," said Roantree, "But I wouldn't suggest hanging around to find out. Let's loose this joker. Keep an ear on him, Paula." She turned the Galilei, moving back toward the asteroid belt, and quietly putting the shields up to emergency setting.

"He is following us," Quannechota reported.

"We'll try to lose him in the belt," said Roantree. "Sorry about this delay, team."

"Belt ahead. Contact in thirty seconds."

"Go slow through this, Jen!" Bailey implored over the suit-radio. "That forward shield isn't much better than mosquito-netting right now."

"I'll take it sideways," Roantree promised, dutifully turning the Galilei ninety to starboard as she entered the belt.

"Hey, the nut's calling back," Hot-Trot warned. "He sounds mad."

"Put him through."

"Turn ninety degrees to port," whined the nasty voice. "Remain on course."

"We are on course," Roantree retorted. "Look, buster: our forward shield is weak. We've got to go through sideways. Do you mind?"

"Asteroidal debris is thickening," Qyanna added. "We cannot safely proceed forward, except at reduced speed."

"Maintain current speed," Strickler insisted. "You are ordered to proceed with all possible haste."

"Either slow or sideways! Which do you want? You can't have both."

"Maintain current course," Strickler hedged.

Roantree made a chopping motion, and Hot-Trot gratefully chopped outgoing transmission. "A local tyrant or a nut, or both," Roantree judged. "We've got to lose him fast. Brace yourselves, everybody."

She turned the ship forward again, moving slowly into the belt with the Pershing hanging close behind. Roantree waited until an especially thick cloud of dust and rock hid their pursuer for a moment, then darted the Galilei sideways at top

speed. The engines howled. The crew clutched at walls, railings and anything else handy.'

"Damn," Roantree muttered, glancing at the sidescreen. "We're leaving a wake as broad as a highway. A blind hog could follow it. Let's hope we can outrun him."

They couldn't. The Pershing overtook them in thirty seconds flat, and fired an all-too-recognizable blue beam fearfully close to the Galilei's starboard engine.

"He's on the horn," Hot-Trot wailed. He's yelling 'cease and desist', and threatening to shoot us down."

"That does it!" bellowed Roantree. "Open to send. Hey, you out there! All we were trying to do was get away from you, you bloodthirsty lunatic! If you won't allow that, then by Mother of Mares, you've got a fight on your hands! Cut him off, Hot-Trot, All hands, hold tight! Quanna, find me some good big rocks in this soup. Bailey, how much power can you divert to the transporter?"

"Asteroid at 2 o'clock high, 1.5 kilometers out," said Quannechota. "Mass, 2.1 tons."

"I can get enough transporter power for that," Bailey enthused. "Where do you want me to put it?"

"In his engine room," said Roantree, sharply braking the Galilei and pulling her around in a tight starboard turn. The Pershing overshot them, but turned smartly and angled back, shooting phaser-bursts. One of the blasts hit, rocking the Galilei.

"Hey!" yelped Bailey. "That hurt!"

"Transport!" snapped Roantree. "Now, before he can hit us again!"

At her word, the lights dimmed, the engine noise dropped and the helm responded sluggishly. Simultaneously, a huge boulder materialized a scant meter off the Pershing prow. The Courier jolted, slowed, staggered off course, but didn't seem damaged.

"The transporter won't go through their shields!" Bailey howled in frustration. "It only clubs them!"

"Give 'em another rock," said Roantree.

For several minutes the mismatched ships dueled, phasers against rocks. The Pershing dashed in, fired, darted away again, Strickler repeatedly at the slower and heavier ship, like a wild dog attacking a hornless cow. The Galilei wheeled clumsily, meeting the charges as best she could on one after another of her weak shields, lashing out with stone hooves to kick her attacker away. The battle was too one-sided to last long.

"No good," Roantree growled. "We just can't hit them hard enough to do any real damage."

"If we hit them enough times," Hot-Trot suggested, "Something's gotta give. Maybe the crew's necks will break."

"We may run out of shields before that happens," Quannechota predicted. "Our best hope is to exhaust his phasers, but without sufficient shields that is unlikely."

Another boulder materialized at the Pershing's nose, and again the smaller ship staggered, but this time a lucky bolt of its return-fire hit the Galilei on a weakened shield.

"Jen," Bailey reported, "Life-support just broke down on deck #11. We can't take many more like that."

"All right," Roantree announced, pulling on her helmet. "Everybody, close up your suits. Bailey, as soon as everyone's suited up, cut life-support completely. Divert the power to the shields. Jean, take over the transporter and throw some more rocks at the nut. You probably won't be able to hit him, the way I'm moving around, but try to keep him too

busy to hit us."

The Galilei resolutely swerved, flipped, turned, ducked and dodged among the dust-swirls and asteroids, but she was clumsy compared to the Pershing and couldn't lose her attacker. The smaller ship couldn't manage another phaser-hit, but avoided most of the materializing rocks.

"We cannot continue this for long," Quanna noted. "We are neither losing him nor draining his phaser-power. Our blows cause no serious damage, while his do."

"I know," muttered Roantree, past clenched teeth. "Throwing rocks didn't do the Cannibal Wheel much good, either. Think, Quanna! Think! What do we have that can get through shields?"

"Nothing but the tractor-beam."

"Tractor... Aha!" A beatific smile wreathed Roantree's face, even as a glancing phaser-bolt rocked the ship. She punched buttons, and the Galilei abruptly dropped to sublight speed. The Pershing overshot wildly. "Bailey, divert all warp-drive power: fifty percent to the aft shield, the rest to the transporter -- temporarily. Jean, collect a thick mess of rocks all around us. Hurry."

For the next forty odd seconds, a blizzard of rocks materialized around the Galilei until the ship was virtually encased in asteroids. Then the sensors showed the Pershing returning.

"Good, Jean. That's enough," Roantree fairly crooned. "Bailey, redirect that fifty percent power to the tractor-beam -- but keep it off until I tell you. Now we drop shields and coast. Quiet everybody; play dead."

The Galilei went dark and silent.

The Pershing approached, slowed, and stopped to marvel. To all sensor reports, the Galilei was dead: no warp-drive or impulse-drive registering, no shields, no life support, no sound, no motion but a slight drifting rotation. There were several life form readings, but they were confused and vague from interference. The Galilei appeared to have spent her last power entombing herself in a ragged hell of asteroids.

Captain Strickler spent several minutes pondering that phenomenon. He finally came to the conclusion that the barbarians, giving themselves up for dead, had wasted their last power on either a beast's instinct for covering themselves or some weird pagan burial rite. In any case, he should recover the ship and any survivors, and tow them back to Starbase 12.

Since there was no longer any need to conserve power, he used his phasers to eliminate the asteroids.

Blast by blast, the rocks vaporized. Little by little the huge lightless hull of the Galilei emerged. A lieutenant discreetly hinted that the Pershing's phaser-banks were almost drained, and that power reserves were getting low.

Strickler paused to consider whether it was more economical to blast away more boulders or to tow the Galilei as she was. Busy with this problem in practical mathematics, he failed to notice the big Transport's stern turning toward him.

The Galilei's aft shield snapped on.

At the same instant, her tractor-beam whipped out and grabbed the Pershing -- yanking it straight toward the aft shield.

Captain Strickler promptly ordered the Pershing into full-power reverse. It didn't work, of course. The Transport was built for strength rather than speed, and she outweighed the Courier by about fifty to one. Strickler might as well have tried to pit a donkey against a draft horse in a tug-of-war. For all that the engines strained and howled, the Pershing began to creep slowly and inexorably toward the waiting aft shield. Strickler tried firing on the Galilei, and soon discovered three unpleasant facts: 1) the Transport's aft shield was in excellent condition and very heavily powered; 2) after two blasts the Pershing's phaser-banks were completely drained; 3) firing the phasers drew off engine power, and the

Pershing was now several meters closer to the Galilei's waiting shield, and she would fall much closer yet if he tapped off engine-power to recharge the phasers. It took Strickler a few minutes to comprehend the nature of the trap that had closed on him, but his crewmen noted that when he did understand the problem he grew exceedingly pale. At that point, the Galilei called back.

"Okay, Pershing," said Roantree, "As I see it, you have about four choices left. You can cut your engine-power and smash yourself on my shield, which will end this quickly. You can keep dragging your heels until you reach me, and then the tractor-beam will crush you slowly against my shield. You can drop your shields and divert the power into recharging your phasers, but before you can shoot again, you'll have a transported boulder in your guts. Then again, you can always surrender."

"Wh-- What are your terms of surrender?" Strickler asked weakly.

"Drop your shields. Rip out all your weapons -- intact -- and jettison them. When we're satisfied that you're completely unarmed, we'll pick up the weapons, take the tractor-beam off you, and let you go away unharmed."

Strickler considered that, ran a quick check through the regulations, remembered Admiral Komack's temper, and concluded that Starfleet would much rather lose a mere Courier than arm these savages with phasers. He attempted a trick. "I regret that I am unable to comply," he said. "My phaser banks are burned out and no longer function. We are carrying no hand weapons."

"Bull," said Roantree. "Our scanners told us otherwise. Hand over your guns."

"I suggest a compromise. We will destroy our weapons if you will release the ship."

"No dice. We want the guns. Hand them over intact."

"I regret that I am unable to comply. Regulations state--"

"Then prepare to be crushed."

"Wait! You can't do this to--"

The Galilei cut off communications. Her crew settled around viewing-screens to watch the imminent destruction of the enemy ship. Several people made bets on how long it would take to crush the Pershing completely. Quannechota used the computer to estimate the seconds remaining until contact, assuming that the Pershing's engines held out to the last, and how long after that the ship's structure would collapse. Odds shifted. The betting pool increased. Ann Bailey waxed philosophical over the phenomenon of a material object being crushed by a hammer and anvil of pure energy. Quannechota countered with speculations about irresistible forces and immovable objects.

On every communications frequency except the navigational channel, the Pershing yelled for help.

"His power-emission rate is dropping," Quanna noted. "I now estimate impact in five minutes or less... Just a moment. Another ship is approaching."

"Identify!" snapped Roantree, hands hovering over the helm buttons.

"It is the Enterprise."

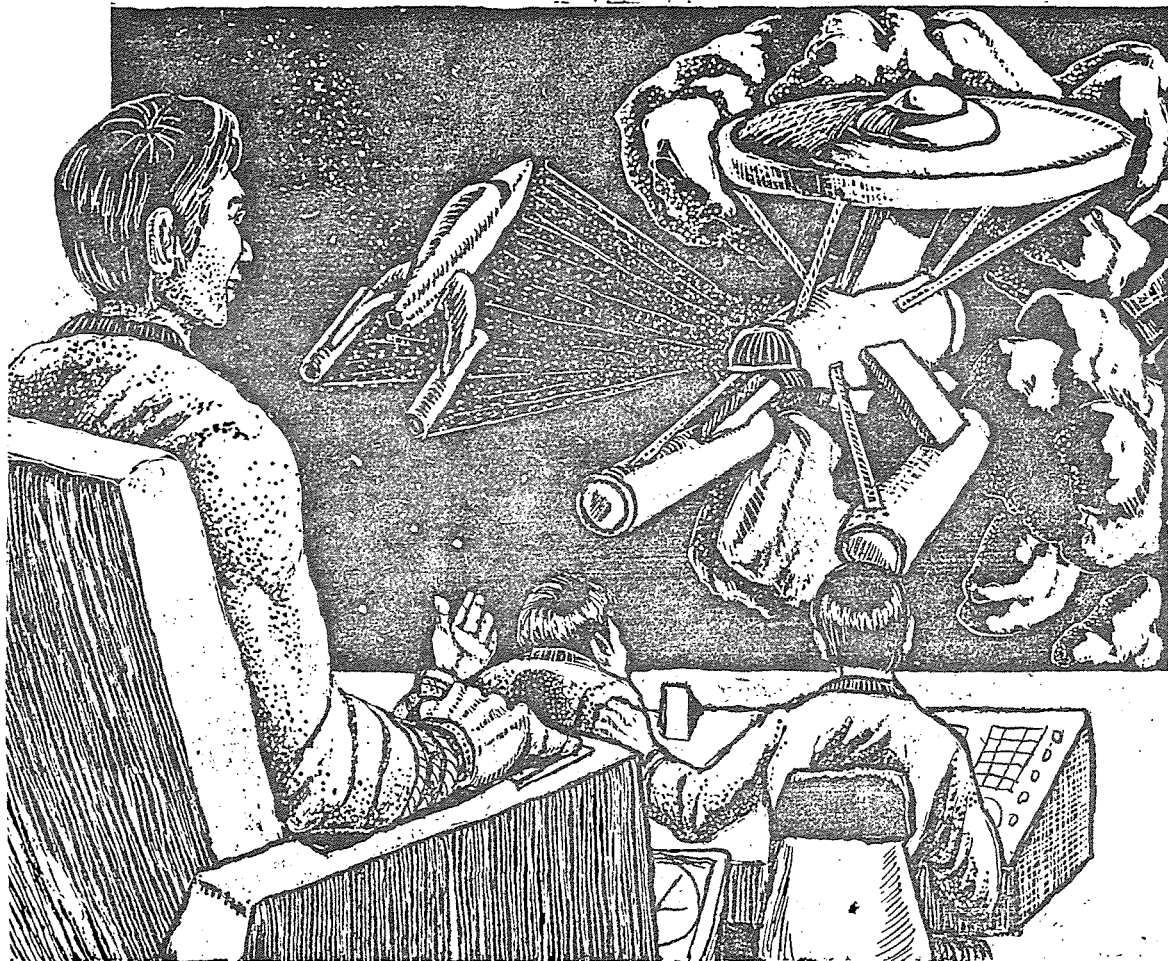
Sure enough, the Enterprise emerged from the dust-cloud, slowed and stopped. On her bridge, Kirk listened to the frantic messages from the Pershing, studied the scene on the viewscreen, and burst out laughing.

Strickler overheard, and was not at all amused. "Kirk!" he yelled back, "Don't just sit there! Do something!"

"I do not understand the nature of the problem," Kirk purred, unable to resist such a fine chance to tease. "Just how

are you endangered by an unarmed ship?"

"She's not unarmed, dammit! You can damn-well see what the problem is, you -- you -- Kirk, this is no time to argue! She's going to crush me in another minute!"



"In another 4.97 minutes," Spock corrected.

"~~She's~~!"

"Why don't you simply obey your orders, and shoot her down?" Kirk twisted the knife a little more. "And how did you manage to get caught in her tractor-beam? After all, you do have the advantage of armament, speed, and maneuverability..."

"She tricked me! She played dead, surrounded herself with asteroids -- I used up the phaser-charge getting rid of them -- and then she slammed the tractor-beam on me. I can't recharge the phasers; I'm using every last erg of power to fight the tractor-beam, and that won't last long. Kirk, get me out of this! Shoot the damned savages!"

"I regret that I am unable to comply," Kirk replied sweetly. "My orders are clear. I must attempt negotiation first."

"We don't have time for -- I've only got a minute left!"

"4.18 minutes," said Spock.

"Kirk, please! Save my ass!"

"I'll do my best. Kirk out. Uhura, open the navigational channel and call the Galilei." He leaned back in the chair and grinned as the Anarchists' hearty welcomes cheered out of the speakers.

"Hi, Jim!" Roantree fairly crowed. "You got here just in time for the finish. You want to make a bet on how long it'll take to smash the little rat?"

"'Fraid not, Jen," Kirk sighed with something close to regret. "I'm here to raid the game. It's not nice to kill prisoners, you know."

"But he's still armed, Jim. I offered to let him go if he'd hand over all his phasers, but he wouldn't take me up on it. As long as a rat has teeth, you can't let him loose to bite again."

"It'll be a long time before he can bite anybody; his phaser-banks are exhausted. He can't recharge them because you've drained the power. He'll be lucky if he can make it home. Take off the tractor-beam -- or at least ease up on it and just hold him still for awhile."

"Oh, all right -- but only if you throw a rope on him too."

"Will do. Sulu, put a holding-level tractor-beam on the Pershing."

Grinning, Sulu complied. Strickler squawked outrage and frantic questions through the standard ship-to-ship channel. Kirk ignored him. The Galilei reluctantly toned down her tractor-beam.

"I still don't see why we should let him go," Roantree complained. "You should've seen the way he behaved. You should've heard some of the crazy things he said. He's obviously from one of those tyrants you warned us about."

"Oh, really?" Kirk did his best to look dismayed. "Hmm, yes, I'd like to know exactly what he said. Do you have tapes of the whole encounter? Can you replay-- er, beam them over to us."

"Glad to. Just a minute."

Actually, it was closer to 3.5 minutes, by Spock's reckoning, that the copied tapes from the Galilei reached the bridge of the Enterprise. The Anarchists were still novices at some things.

Spock replayed the tapes on the main viewscreen, and the whole bridge-crew watched in fascinated silence -- up into the instant the Galilei snapped the tractor-and-shield trap shut on the Pershing. Spock was dismayed at the spontaneous cheers that broke out then, and even more perturbed by Kirk's admiring comments.

"Beautiful..brilliant..." Kirk didn't take his eyes off the screen. "What a talent for bluffing! Must run in the family... And what an imagination! Throwing rocks with the transporter, getting him to exhaust his phasers on asteroids, using a tractor-beam for a weapon -- Damn! We've got to keep them as allies! We can't afford them as enemies."

"Captain," Spock nudged, "We have a more immediate problem."

"True," Kirk sighed. "Uhura, call Strickler; tell him to listen in on the navigational channel but to keep absolutely quiet unless I call him directly. If he goes along with the story I tell, I can get him out of this. Make him understand that-- and then put me through to the Galilei."

"Yessir." Uhura complied, meanwhile watching where Spock put those log-tapes. She could put records to very good use.

"Sir," she reported, "Captain Strickler says he'll do it, and he's switching to navigation-channel reception right now. The Galilei is standing by."

"Put it on. Hello, Jenneth."

"Hi again, Jim. How do you like the tapes?"

"Very much, Jen. That was a lovely trick if I say so myself. But if I can make a suggestion, I still think you should let him go. That way, when he gets back home he'll tell all his friends what happened, and none of them will want to tangle with you again."

"Hmm... Maybe. Where does he come from, anyway? Are there many more like him?"

"Well, I haven't run into too many martinets like him," Kirk admitted. Closer I can stick to the truth, the easier it'll be... "Nobody's quite sure where they come from, but you always find one or two of them wherever you go. They're usually just minor annoyances, not a real threat." Chew on that, Strickler!

"How do you recognize 'Martinets'? Do they always fly ships like that one?"

"Oh, no, not at all. You find them on all kinds of ships, or on planets -- practically everywhere, as I said -- though some communities tolerate them more than others. You can recognize them by the way they behave."

"You mean... 'Martinets' are some kind of religious nuts? The way he kept talking about 'orders', that was my first guess: something like the ancient Assassins, or the Thugs."

"Ah, yes, that's a good way to describe them." Strickler must be apologetic by now... "As near as I can tell, they never seem to think of themselves, but devote their whole lives to obeying their, ah, laws and leaders. If you let this one go, he'll run off to report to his, uh, high priest or whatever, and the word will get around."

"Are you sure that this Martinet's... ah, the equivalent of 'the Old Man of the Mountain' -- will he tell his slaveys to let us alone afterwards?"

"Well, nothing in the universe is one hundred percent sure, but I think your chances of being left alone are much, much better if you let him go." Out of sight, Kirk crossed his fingers.

"Just a minute. We've got to talk this over. Roantree out."

Kirk leaned back and waited. Sure enough, within ten seconds Strickler called.

"Kirk!" he shrilled, "Admiral Komack is going to hear about this!"

"I certainly hope so." Right! Go report to the High Priest of Thuggee! "In point of fact, I didn't tell them one single lie. You'd better see to it that the rest comes true; advise Starfleet to leave Jenneth's people strictly alone. You can tell them, from personal experience, that the Captain and crew of the Galilei are impossible to command and damned hard to kill."

Strickler cut off communications with no further comment. In a moment more, the Galilei called back.

"Jim, we're willing to let him go," Jenneth reported, "But we're hoping to get some spare parts off him, which we badly need. We need lots of new shielding mechanisms, and we want some phasers, and our radio isn't nearly as good as the Enterprise's. Isn't there any way we can get them from this Martinet? Could we hold him for ransom, maybe?"

"No, he'd destroy his ship first, and his High Priest wouldn't pay ransom for him. You can get those parts elsewhere, though -- say, back at Starbase 12."

"When we asked them at the base, they said they were all out."

"Well, remember that the convoy came in recently. Maybe they have the parts now."

"Oh... All right." The Galilei's tractor-beam abruptly shut off. Her communications-beam shifted to the Pershing, though the Enterprise could still overhear. "Hey, Pershing," said Roantree, "We're letting you go. Get out of here, sheep. Run and tell your Old Man of the Mountain that we whipped you once and we can whip you again, so leave us the hell alone."

Kirk likewise dropped the Enterprise's tractor-beam. No further message to Strickler was necessary; the Pershing took off at the best speed it could manage, and was out of sensor-range in a minute. There was a brief rattle of applause and laughter on the Enterprise's bridge.

"Jim, that was terrific," McCoy commended. "You're becoming as wily as Harry Mudd."

"That is hardly a compliment," Spock sniffed.

"I take it as such. Uhura, resume contact with the Galilei." Kirk straightened his shoulders and leaned forward. One down, one to go... "Very nice, Jen. Ah, by the way, I wish you hadn't gone running off without telling anybody. Nobody at Starbase 12 knew what happened to you, and we were worried."

"But we did tell people," Roantree replied indignantly. "We sent five different messages, at ten minute intervals, telling Starbase 12 where we were going. We didn't get any answer, but we thought that the messages would get back there eventually."

"I'm afraid they didn't. You should have come back within direct contact range."

"Hmm, I'm afraid we didn't know that. The Enterprise's radio could send that kind of delayed message, so naturally we thought the Galilei's could too. Sparks might have figured it out, but... Look, Jim, there's something wrong with our radio. It doesn't have visual reception the way yours does, it only has one out-ship channel instead of half-a-dozen, and from what you've just told me it doesn't reach very far. We've got to get a better radio -- not to mention phasers and shield-parts -- and that's all there is to it."

"Also, our computer-library is much smaller than yours," added Guannechota.

"Yes, you've got a good point there," Kirk admitted. Beginning of the end. More channels and they can't help over-hearing... Maybe we can keep the mechanisms inoperative until they get to the new planet... "Come back to Starbase 12 and I'll see to it that you get that equipment."

"It'll have to wait until we get back. We have to go home first."

"Have to? Why?"

"Huh?! Why, we want to see our city, of course! We want to see what it looks like now, find our friends and relatives, tell them about this new planet we're getting and see how many of them want to go there. Besides, it's been so long since we set foot on real, solid ground! We want to go home, Jim. Can't you see that?"

"Jenny, I'm sorry." Here it comes. No way out. "You can't go back to Earth."

"WHAT?!" chorused all the voices of the Galilei. "Why?! Why not?"

Kirk took a deep breath.

"Because of the disease!" McCoy cut in, stepping forward. Kirk stared at him. So did everybody else. "We didn't tell you earlier because we didn't know it was such a danger to you. I wasn't sure myself until I studied all those medical examinations and compared them with Earth-normal readings. That's one of the reasons we came after you: to tell you about

it, and warn you away from Earth."

"What... disease?" asked Roantree, her voice stiff and cold. "We're not carrying anything anymore. You told us you'd cured all the bugs we had."

"Not you: them," McCoy replied. "Things happen differently in this universe, after the Moon-people came back to Earth. It was one last side-effect of the Eugenics Wars: two different virus strains -- one on Earth and one brought back with the Moon-people -- harmless in themselves, but deadly when put together. It's endemic, all over the world. Everyone on Earth is immune to it -- but you're not. One breath of planetary air and you'd all be dead within a week. You can't land on Earth, Jenneth; it's certain death, for you and all your people."

There was a long silence. When Roantree spoke again her voice was shaky. "But... you've all said... people visit Earth and come back all the time. We haven't caught anything from you..."

"We can eliminate it among ourselves, in anyone born on Earth or the descendants of Earthmen born after the return from the Moon. They all have natural immunity. When someone visits Earth he gets quarantined and cured when he comes back. Nobody off Earth is carrying it. Nonhumans don't catch it. But we can't clear the virus off the planet, and we couldn't cure you if you caught it. You can't set foot on Earth, Jenneth. It's certain death."

"You can't go home again..." Roantree quoted, her voice almost unrecognizable. "We can't even look at it! No visual... Jim, can we come over and use your communications set to look at Earth? We can't go away forever without even seeing it..."

"Ah, I can do better than that," Kirk promised, nodding a brief salute to McCoy. "We do have some spare parts for, ah, visual reception. Scotty will bring them over and install them, so you can see Earth from here. We'll also send any shield-mechanism parts that we can spare."

"Thanks. We'll wait. Roantree out."

The transmission stopped. On the viewscreen the Galilei hung motionless, her lights slowly coming back on, her screens down. Kirk leaned back in his chair with a long sigh of relief. "Scotty," he said, "Take whatever equipment you need, and give them visual reception on the long-distance scanners. Don't tie it in with their communications. See that they don't link up audio. It won't hurt them to look at Earth, but don't let them hear anything new."

"Aye, Sir." Scott stood up, then paused. "Ye're sure thot lookin' at Earth willna gi' tha game away?"

"Pretty sure, Scotty. How would they recognize a politician on sight? Especially if they've never seen one? Government office buildings look like any other office buildings. If they notice anyone in uniform, you can always say he's from a community health service or a sanitation co-op."

"Aye," Scott grinned humorously. "'Twill no' be too much of a lie." He walked off the bridge, leaving the crew to wonder just what he'd meant by that."

"Thanks, Bones." Kirk turned to McCoy. "That story saved the day."

"It was the one excuse they'd accept." McCoy glowered at the screen. "Give me a membership card in the Harry Mudd Honorary Liars' Club. No, maybe not. I stuck pretty close to the truth, at that."

"What? You mean there really is a disease on Earth that could kill Jenneth's people?"

"Yep," snapped McCoy, heading for the turbolift. "It's called goddamgov'mintmen' -- root stock of 'goddamtaxes' and 'goddamrevenueors' -- and it is all over the world." The doors whooshed shut behind him before anyone could react, let alone reply.

Project Tape R-264, Roantree recording:

..I THINK WE'RE STUNNED. ALL OF US. GOOD THING WE HAVE SOMETHING TO DO, KEEP OCCUPIED, HELP SCOTTY PUT IN THE VISUAL CHANNEL... TRY NOT TO THINK ABOUT IT TOO MUCH YET, GIVE OURSELVES TIME... TIME...

DAMN THESE GAMES WITH TIME! ALL THESE MONTHS OF TOIL AND LOSS, TO SAVE EARTH FROM LUDDITES AND ROMULANS, TO GIVE US A FUTURE WE COULD BELIEVE IN.. AND NOW WE CAN'T TOUCH IT. WE'RE STUCK OUTSIDE THE GATES OF HEAVEN WE MADE, AND THE BEST WE CAN DO IS PEER OVER THE WALL BEFORE WE GO. LOOK, BUT DON'T TOUCH. 'LONG LARKIN BUILT A CASTLE, BUT HE COULD NOT GO IN...'

OH, WHO ARE THESE PEOPLE, 'THE SETTLED AND COMFORTABLE', LIVING ON THIS WORLD WE MADE? DO THEY EVEN KNOW HOW PRECIOUS EARTH IS? DO THEY EVER THANK THEIR GODS THAT THEY DON'T GO HUNGRY IN WINTER, OR THAT THEIR CHILDREN ARE BORN HEALTHY AND LIVE TO GROW UP, OR THAT RAIDERS DON'T SWOOP DOWN FROM THE HILLS OR THE SKY TO TAKE ALL THEY HAVE? ...NO, THEY PROBABLY NEVER THINK OF IT. GREAT MOTHER, FORGIVE: WE WOULD HAVE BEEN THANKFUL ENOUGH TO MAKE UP FOR ALL OF THEM, BUT WE CAN'T REACH YOU...

WE HAVE TO FIND OUR PEOPLE, OUR FRIENDS AND RELATIVES. WE HAVE TO FIND THE PLACES WHERE WE FIT IN THIS UNIVERSE. WE HAVE TO GATHER UP WHAT WE CAN TAKE TO OUR NEW WORLD... THE ONLY WORLD WE HAVE NOW. NO PUTTING IT OFF ANYMORE.

It was 'night' on both ships; most of the Enterprise crew had gone to bed, but few of the Anarchists were sleeping. Roantree and her crew sat quietly before their assorted viewscreens, in moods varying between grief and wonder, watching the newly available long-distance scans of Earth. They watched the tall cities glowing in sunset or gemmed with night-lighting, marveling at their size and number and obvious wealth. They watched the broad farmlands turning toward twilight, great herds of farm-beasts and the tending-machines brought in for the evening, and they thought of how rich those harvests must be. They watched the broad tracts of forests and jungles thick with wildlife settling down or getting up for the night, and they considered how good the hunting and timbering was there. They watched the border of night advance over desert and village and wrinkled sea. They watched the crowds of healthy and well-fed people moving here and there on familiar or unguessable errands. They watched the smooth motion of surface flying machines and ground cars and ships on the rivers and lakes and oceans. They watched the great ring of factory-satellites that floated in stately orbit around the Earth. They watched the fleets of spacecraft that arrived and departed and circled the planet in a thick and constant stream. They marveled over the marvels of the Earth that they had always dreamed of, and they grieved that they could never touch it, but only look through a distant window in the endless black sky.

"If only we could reach them, talk to them," Hot-Trot cried. "We might as well be ghosts, out here."

"We haven't the parts for that," Bailey rasped, not taking her eyes off the screen. "Monty says the Enterprise has no spares. We'll have to go back to Starbase 12 for 'em."

"Could you jury-rig something out of other parts?" Roantree raised her head to ask. "Exactly what do we need?"

"Don't even know. The computer library's incomplete."

"Now wait a minute. The Enterprise is right over there, and she's got a good library. Why can't we get the information from her computer?"

"It should not be impossible," Quannechota considered. "If I could beam over to the Enterprise, I could question her computer and bring back tapes of the information."

"Possible," Roantree agreed. "Problem is that Jim doesn't want us knocking around on his bridge, getting in the way of all his folks."

"I could get it from the computer laboratory, which should be fairly uncrowded at this hour."

"I'll go too," Bailey offered, getting up. "I want to pick up some more 6-18 coils, anyway."

"Fine." Roantree went to the command-chair and pressed an intercom button. "Hello, transporter room. Anybody there?"

Hey, will somebody please go to the transporter room and send a couple people over to the Enterprise? ...Ah, thanks, Jean."

A few minutes later, Bailey and Quannechota materialized in the corridor just outside the Enterprise's computer lab. A wall-communicator began to bleep: "Intruder alert!"

Bailey swore, stamped over to the intercom and jabbed its buttons. "Intruder, nothing!" she bellowed. "It's only me. I came back for some spare coils. Monty, are you up and about?"

While Bailey argued with the intercom, Quannechota went over to the computer-lab door. It didn't open at once, which she thought a trifle odd, but it yielded readily when she pressed her hand against the lock-plate. She shrugged and went in, the door closing silently behind her.

"Well, dammit, Monty," Bailey continued to yell into the intercom, "I'm not asking you to get out of bed. Just tell me where to find the damned coils, and I'll go get 'em myself... Have to tell who? ...Fine, so tell your boys I'm coming down. Damn all this fussiness, anyway." She snapped off the intercom, made a mental note of the computer-lab's room number, and plodded off down the corridor in search of Engineering Supplies Locker B.

Montgomery Scott, irritated at being hauled back from the edge of sleep, called down to the Engineering Supplies deck. "Hello, Kimbela?" he snapped. "Ann Bailey's comin' doon ta fetch some mair spare parts. Let her have wha' she wants, and dinna let anyone else bother me tonight." With that, he jabbed off the intercom and rolled over, pulled the pillow over his head and went resolutely back to sleep. It never occurred to him that his instructions were a trifle vague.

For some odd reason, Quannechota discovered, the terminal in the computer-lab required a handprint before it would answer her. Perhaps this had something to do with keeping salable knowledge where only the head knowledge-merchant had access to it, but then why did her handprint unlock the terminal? She restrained an urge to experiment, reminding herself to concentrate on the job at hand.

"Read out on tapes all information on the following equipment," she began. It took awhile to make the computer understand what equipment she meant, and with a fresh pang she regretted the loss of Sparks. Once precisely informed though, the computer obligingly spat out a good two-dozen tapes. Quannechota studied them, a little perplexed. There were no carrying-pouches handy, and toting all the tapes by hand would be difficult. There certainly wasn't time to read them back to the Galilei over the Transport's lone communications channel; that would take her all night, at least. Wait, she remembered, this ship has more channels, might transmit directly... she poked more buttons, and asked for information about direct computer-to-computer transmissions. The answer came promptly; the procedure was surprisingly simple. With a rare smile, Quannechota dropped the tapes back into the slot. She manipulated the buttons, sat back and watched while the computer did all the work. As the last of the tapes played off she got another idea... Why stop here?

She tapped another button and expanded her order. "Computer, transmit readout of all data, all banks..." Wait. Unfair to steal the co-ops restricted sale knowledge. Wait until we hear how they decide... "Transmit to Galilei's computer: retain voice-lock on data restricted by Science Officer Spock."

It took a long time.

Ann Bailey finished loading the deflector-screen coils onto the grav-cart and leaned back to stretch the kinks out of her spine. Her eyes fell on the loaded upper shelves. She blinked, did a classic double-take, and then gave the objects thereon a long, steady look. Then she went to the nearest intercom unit and called the computer lab. She phrased her words carefully.

"Quanna, what exactly am I supposed to pick up?" She flicked a brief, expressionless glance at the Under-Engineer hovering nearby. "What do you mean, wait a minute? You've been up there almost an hour! ...Oh... oh... I see. Sure, I'll wait." She turned blandly to the Under-Engineer and asked: "Hey, could you lend me your scratch-pad for a minute? Thanks, spread across her face. "Wait a minute, I'm writing as fast as I can... okay... got it. Right. Thanks. ...Nah, it shouldn't take long to get. I might need some help shoving it around, though. Meet me in the transporter room. ...Oh, about ten minutes. Bailey out." She turned back to the assistant and held out the pad. "Can you help me get one each of these?"

Assistant Engineer Kimbwela studied the notes on the pad, saw nothing that resembled weaponry parts, remembered the Chief Engineer's grumpy orders, and obligingly helped the Anarchist Mechanic find and load the items she needed. He had no reason to believe that any of the equipment was on the taboo list, or that the voice on the other end of the transmission had not come from the Galilei. To the best of his knowledge, Bailey was the only Anarchist presently on the Enterprise.

Bailey thanked him politely, went whistling off to the turbo-lift dragging her loaded grav-cart, and rode up to the transporter room. Quannechota was already there, her stoic face showing nothing unusual. A bemused lieutenant watched the two women haul the cart onto the platform and take two of the other stations. He pulled down the energizing levers and dutifully beamed them back to the Galilei, and then forgot about them. He had no reason to believe that nobody else on the Enterprise knew that Quannechota had been there.

Project Tape R-265, Roantree recording:

THANKS TO QUANNA, WE NOW HAVE MUCH UNEXPECTED COMPUTER-INFO, AS MUCH AS THE ENTERPRISE EXCEPT FOR THE STUFF RESERVED FOR SALE. WE CAN USE IT TO FIND OUR PEOPLE, AND GOOD THING, BECAUSE PEOPLE HAVE GOTTEN FRANTIC TO FIND THEIR FRIENDS AND RELATIVES BEFORE WE HAVE TO LEAVE. EVERYBODY'S CROWDING THE COMPUTER TERMINALS, HUNTING FOR INFORMATION...

THIS UNIVERSE -- BUT IT WASN'T US LEADING THEM. THERE ARE NO PLACES WAITING FOR US TO STEP INTO: OTHER PEOPLE ARE ALREADY THERE. WE SHOULD HAVE GUESSED, SEEING ME AND JIM TOGETHER, SEEING HIM COME THROUGH THE GUARDIAN. IF JIM AND I COULD EXIST IN THE SAME UNIVERSE, SO COULD ALL OF US AND OUR COUNTERPARTS. WHY DID IT TAKE SO LONG TO REALIZE IT? I SUPPOSE WE DIDN'T WANT TO...

SO MUCH FOR DREAMING. WAKE UP TO A WINTER MORNING. 'I AIN'T GOT NO HOME IN THIS WORLD ANYMORE...'

BAILEY ALSO MANAGED TO GET SOME INFORMATION AND PARTS THAT'LL HELP HER JURY-RIG A LONG-DISTANCE COMMUNICATIONS CHANNEL. IT'S THE BEST WE CAN MANAGE, THIS SIDE OF STARBASE 12... AND WITHOUT SPARKS' SPECIAL GENIUS... HOPE IT WORKS.

By ship's 'dawn' the occupations of the Galilei's crew had shifted again. One-third were asleep, finally clubbed down by exhaustion. One-sixth were still watching the pictures of Earth, but jittery with patience while they awaited their turns at the computer consoles. One-sixth were helping Quannechota and Bailey get the homemade audio-channel equipment installed. One-third were using the new computer-knowledge to hunt down their friends, relatives and alternate selves in this universe -- and their successes were inevitably marked with pain. Someone had put a tape of sad songs on the intercom, and the grim tunes complimented their mood all too well.

I'm a stranger here in this place called Earth.
I was sent down here to discover the worth
Of your pretty blue planet, third from the sun.
Come won't you show me what you've done?

"So, I finally know who I am here," Jean Battre-le-Diable was crying into his beer. "A famous neurosurgeon, teaching and working and doing research at one of the best hospitals in the galaxy. Oh, it's a splendid life -- but there's another me living it! There are two of us, now. He has the life I should have had, and I'm still here. What am I supposed to do, now that I can't go back to High Harbor? We might as well go to this new world and start over. We might as well go."

We've got the air-o-plane. We've got the automobile.
We've got sky-scraping buildings made of glass and steel.
We've got synthetic food that nearly tastes real,
And a little white pill that makes you feel
A whole lot better when you get out of bed;
You take one in the morning for the long day ahead.
We've got everything everybody needs to survive.
Surely the Good Life has arrived!

"I guess there's no point trying to call our old friends in High Harbor," Hot-Trot commensurated, wiping tears and gin-splashes off her cheeks. "The 'us' they know are already there; the 'us' up here, they wouldn't recognize. Oh, our dead are alive all right, but it isn't us that they know. I guess we have to be content with that."

I think your atmosphere is hurting my eyes,
And your concrete buildings are blocking out the skies.
Now I don't say that you've been telling me lies;
But why do I keep hearing those children's cries?
I'm just a stranger here, only looking around...

"Sparks..." Roantree signed, staring into the depths of her brandy. "He's alive, but he doesn't know me. Here he's a woman and married to someone else. Not the Sparks I knew. He's gone, and gone forever. So are my children.:

We've got the rivers and the mountains and the valleys and the trees.
We've got the birds in the sky, we've got the fish in the seas.
We've got--
--Oh, you crazy fools, don't you know
That you had it made? You were living in Paradise!
And take it from one who knows:
The gates of heaven can close!
I hope and pray that you take my advise,
Because Paradise won't come twice...

Roantree got up and went to the wall-communicator, and called Guannechota for the fourth or fifth time in the last hour. "Hello, Quanna. How's the audio-rig doing?"

"Installed now. Bailey is checking the circuitry, which she says is fragile. She wishes to make the first call, and has requested my help in locating her daughter Elizabeth."

"That figures." Roantree smiled faintly. "Tell her I wish her luck. Better luck than ours, anyway. Roantree out."

On the bridge, Guannechota stared at the viewscreen, then shook her head and went back to taping all known information on the daughter of Ann Bailey/Scott. She was frowning thoughtfully as she handed the tape to Bailey. "Do not raise your hopes too high," she cautioned. "In this universe your daughter is not a teacher. Indeed, she seems to have no occupation, but lives off the wealth of her husband, one Chester Puray, who is a wholesale merchant of... household appliances."

"My Lizzy, an idler?" Bailey glowered through bloodshot eyes as she took the tape. "I can't believe it. Must be some mistake." She plugged the tape into the nearest viewer, blinking slowly as she read it. "...doesn't make sense," she muttered. "Have to find out. ...Ah, coordinates. No, let me do it." She got up and went to the Communications Console, and carefully depressed buttons. "Now, Hot-Trot. Cut in the power. Tighten the beam..."

"You booster circuit is overloading," Quanna warned.

"It'll hold, it'll hold... Ah. There!"

On the sidescreen a picture appeared: a thin and pouty face under the tangled ruins of an over-elaborate hairdo, framed with a fussy lace collar attached to a shocking pink robe. The sleep-bagged eyes blinked repeatedly, as if having trouble accepting what they saw. She wasn't alone in that; Ann Bailey had trouble recognizing that face as her daughter's.

"Lizzie...?" she almost whispered. "Lizzie, how are you?"

"Mother, is that you?" The voice too was shockingly different. It seemed set in the tone of a petulant whine, as if its owner went through life in a constant state of dissatisfaction. "Why are you calling me at this hour? And why are you dressed like that? What are those smudges on your face? Is something wrong? Have you been in an accident?" There was

some concern in the woman's expression, but it seemed edged with a kind of automatic hysteria rather than depth.

"Huh? ...Oh, no. No, nothing like that. I'm fine. I've been working, and I didn't take time to wash up before I called you. But never mind me. How are you doing, Lizzie?"

An instant's look of relief changed promptly to exasperation. "Motherrr, how many times have I told you not to call me that? It's Elyssa. Elyssa Beth Pursey. Please remember!"

"Elyssa'? ...All right."

"And what in the worlds are you doing, Mother. You're a mess."

"Huh? Oh, I've been rewiring a communications channel."

"What? Re-whatting a what."

"Rewiring communications. I told you I was working."

"Working? You?" The woman stared at Bailey as if she'd suddenly grown another head. That soon gave way to a narrow look of suspicion. "Motherrr, what kind of crazy fad are you into now? First, it was Yoga, then wheat-germ diets, then--"

"Mechanics. Spaceship mechanics. Engineering, and like that."

"Spaceship... engineering..." Elyssa's face replayed its last two expressions. "Mother, of all the crazy things to-- Did Uncle Monty put you up to this?"

"No, he had nothing to do with it. Never mind that now. Liz -- Elyssa, how are you getting along? What are you doing these days?"

"Oh, I'm practically dying, waiting for Chester's promotion. Assistant Chief Sales Manager! Just think! That's an automatic twenty-five-hundred-a-year increase, and he might even be relocated out to the new Centauri office, and we could get a much bigger house in the Vermillion Grove. The Matthewses are simply going to die of envy!"

"I'm not asking about your husband; I'm asking about you. I hear -- I mean, you don't seem to have an occupation. What do you do with your time?"

"What? Why, everything! I'm so busy every day, what with shopping, and programming the household appliances, and my macrame class, and the bridge club, and entertaining--"

"Entertaining? You mean you've become a singer? Or you play a musical instrument, or--"

"Oh, motherrr, stop playing cute! You know very well what I mean, and don't pretend that it isn't important to entertain Chester's business friends! I'll have you know that I'm considered one of the ten best hostesses in River Hill, and anybody who's anybody simply has to be invited to my little Saturday evening events. Chester says he clinched more business deals at my parties than--"

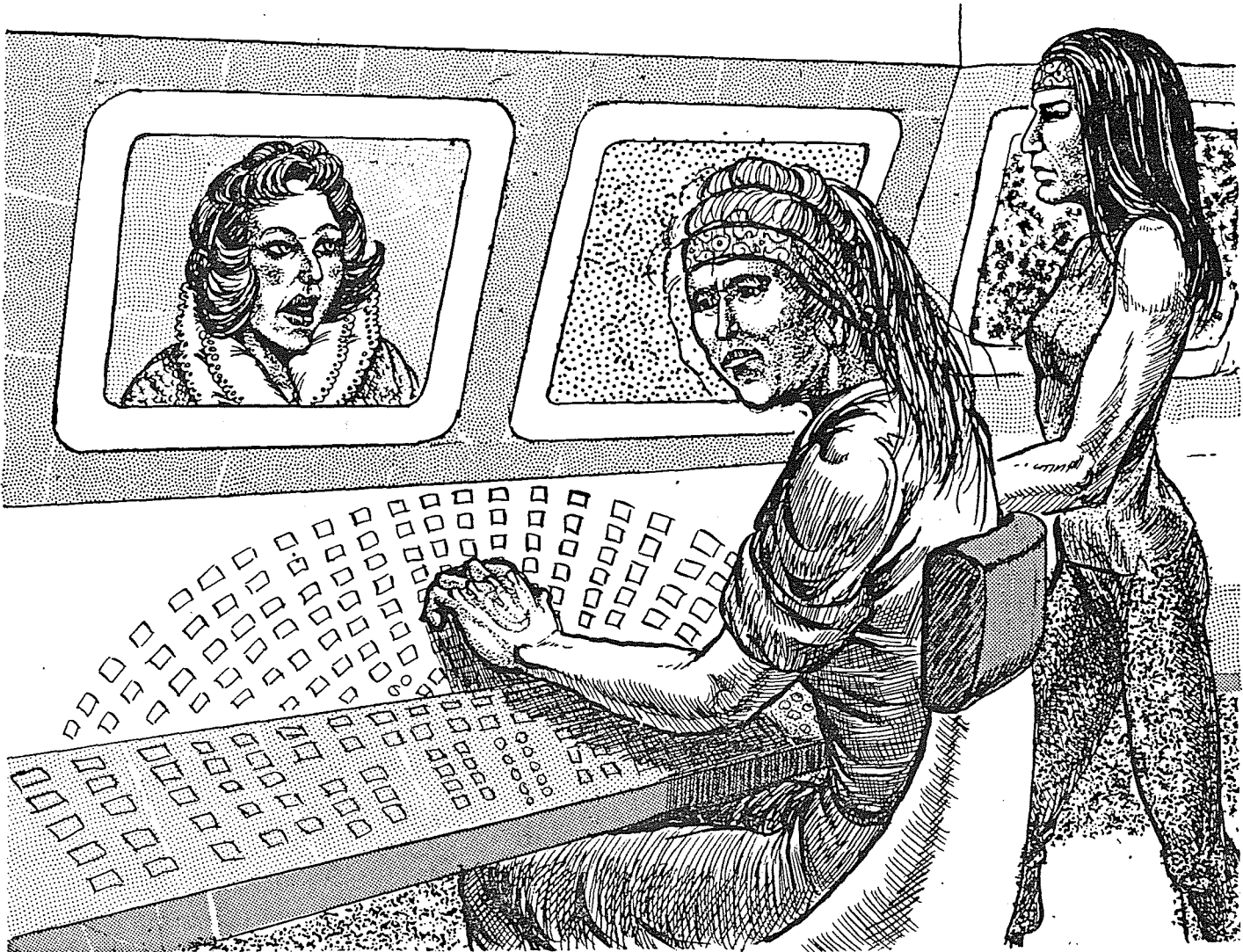
"Are you... trying to tell me... that you spend most of your time planning parties?" Bailey rubbed her eyes hard. "Lizzie-- I mean, Elyssa, can't you think of anything better to do with your time?"

"What?" Elyssa looked insulted. "Such as what?"

Bailey went blank for a second. It had just occurred to her that she really knew very little about the economics of this universe's Earth, or just what her daughter could be doing therein. "Well... colonizing a new world, for one thing?"

"Huh?" Elyssa did a classic double-take. "...colonizing?"

"Yes, yes!" Bailey took a deep breath and plunged ahead. "Look, I'm in a co-op with the crew of this ship and we've just gotten a planet -- a whole world, practically to ourselves. We're going to go out there and colonize it, but we need more people. Lizzie, do you want to come with us?"



Elyssa pursed her mouth and pulled back from the viewer, looking almost frightened. "Mother, is this some kind of joke?"

"No, Lizz-- No. It's for real, I swear!"

"Well, I swear, you must be drunk! Probably on that awful cherry cordial of yours. Mother, didn't you just hear me tell you that Chester's going to be promoted any day now? Assistant Chief Sales Manager! Twenty-five thousand credits a year, and a house in Vermillion Grove! Are you seriously asking me and Chester to drop all that and go running off on some crazy scheme of yours to become farmers on some backwater?! Mother, don't be stupid!"

"It wouldn't hurt you to do some farmwork," Bailey said, very slowly, looking Elyssa up and down. "It might make you more fit for having children. I daresay it wouldn't hurt your husband, either."

"Are you back on that Physical Culture fad again? I remember how you practically drove us out of our minds harping on that one -- until you turned your ankle playing tennis. Heh! Well so what if Chester has a little bit of a pot belly? You didn't have to mention it in front of the neighbors, that time. And for heaven's sake stop carping about grandchildren! We're planning to have our first after Chester gets the promotion, so you can stop nagging and wait until then!"

"Then... you won't come with us?"

"Absolutely not, Mother! I really have more important things to do."

"Lizzie, don't you think that a ship and a whole planet are worth more than a house in -- in Vermillion Grove?"

"Not if you have to start from scratch, do everything yourself, scramble around in mud just to put a roof over your head. I never was terribly enamored of the provincial life, Mother. Really. I just don't know what I'd do without a decent modern household, modern conveniences and all. Why, I'd look so positively wretched if I had to set my hair myself. Mr. Charles does it so marvelously... I hope I can find another hair stylist of his caliber when we move."

"I think you've missed the point."

"Well, the point is, we're doing very nicely here in River Hill and we'll be doing even better in Vermillion Grove, and don't you dare call up Chester and carp at him about dropping everything to go running off on your latest scheme. I really think you should have taken the house in Palm Beach, next to that nice Mr. What's-his-name. Then you wouldn't be bothering me all the time with your nutty fads. Now I've got to hang up. There's a half-price sale at the Chic Shoppe today, and I've just got to get there early or all the best cocktail dresses will be gone, gone, gone. Goodbye, Mother."

"Lizzie..."

"Goodbye, Mother." The picture snapped off.

"Wait!" Bailey tried to re-set the call. A sharp fizzling noise and a puff of smoke ended the attempt.

"The booster-circuit has burned out," Quannechota reported. "I fear there will be no further calls to Earth."

"Yeah..." Bailey stared blank-eyed at the screen for several seconds, then turned around to glare outrage at the image of Earth on the main viewscreen. "What the hell kind of people are these?" she asked nobody in particular. "What kind of worthless, vain, shallow fools are these? What have they done to our world?"

Stardate 5951.5, Enterprise to Starbase #12, Kirk recording:

HAVE COMPLETED REPAIRS ON THE GALILEI'S DEFLECTOR SCREENS AND ARE RETURNING WITH HER TO STARBASE #12 FOR FURTHER REPAIRS AND SUPPLIES. SPECIAL COMMENDATION TO DR. MCCOY FOR QUICK THINKING AND RESOURCEFULNESS IN PERSUADING JENNETH'S PEOPLE NOT TO LAND ON EARTH FOR FEAR OF CONTACTING AN INCURABLE VIRUS INFECTION, SUPPOSEDLY FATAL, TO WHICH OTHER HUMANS ARE IMMUNE. THIS STORY HAS CONVINCED JENNETH'S PEOPLE THAT THEY SHOULD PROCEED WITH ALL DUE HASTE TO THEIR NEW PLANET. I SUGGEST THAT ALL BASE PERSONNEL SHOULD BE WARNED, BRIEFED AND INSTRUCTED TO GO ALONG WITH DR. MCCOY'S STORY.

THE ENTERPRISE TOO IS IN NEED OF SUPPLIES, REPAIRS AND NUMEROUS SPARE PARTS.

"Jenneth, you still awake?"

"Yes, for awhile anyway. Come on in."

Bailey entered Roantree's cabin, dropped into the nearest chair and began pulling off her spacesuit. Her face had set in a weary, bitter look. Quannechota had brought out another glass and poured her a shot from Roantree's diminishing stock. Bailey nodded absent thanks and took the glass, but didn't drink right away.

Roantree tried, unsuccessfully, to stifle a large yawn. "It's been a long and busy day," she apologized. "What's on

your mind, Ann?"

"These... people." Bailey brooded at her glass, as if it were obstinately clouded crystal ball. "I'm beginning to wonder alot about these Alliance people." She took a thoughtful sip. "It isn't just that their customs are different, it's how they're different. Somehow, it smells."

"I've noticed," Roantree concurred. "They have some weird ideas about mating and breeding, seem to exaggerate the gender-difference way out of proportion, treat women like weaklings or fools..."

"And the women seem to act accordingly."

"They exhibit a bizarre squeamishness toward basic realities of life," Quannechota added. "Their ethical system appears frivolous and unrealistic."

"'Frivolous'..." Bailey leaned back and considered the word. "I'd say more than that. I'd say shallow, childish, narrow-minded...and arrogant. The more I see of them, the less I like of them. What I saw and heard of Earth today..." She shook her head. "Lizzie -- my Lizzie -- a worthless shrew. Hard to believe."

"Sparks--" Roantree stopped herself. "Well, we've found our dead come alive again, all right, but not they way we hoped they'd be."

"Nor our world, nor our lives in it."

"Jim told us it wasn't paradise," Roantree repeated for the dozenth time that day. "We just didn't realize how true it was... or how it was true."

"But all of Earth full of whining fools? What the hell kind of society can make so many of its people into fools like that?"

"You recall Citizen Scott's comment, some weeks ago," Quannechota pointed out. "He did say that Earth belonged primarily to the 'settled and comfortable', and that all those with other desires had gone to space."

"I'm beginning to wonder about the ones in space, too." Bailey gave Roantree a long keen look over the edge of her glass. "The people at the Starbase treat us worse than the Enterprise people -- like something they found on the doormat after a flood. I didn't mind their nosy curiosity at first, but I'm getting a little fed up with the way they stare and sneer and laugh at us when they think we aren't looking. Lord's Antlers! They treat the real aliens better than that!"

"As if we were quaint, poor relations that they're ashamed of." Roantree's eyes narrowed. "I remember what Jim said -- even him -- the first time he got a good look at the Sunfire..."

"Huh? What did he say?" Bailey bristled. She had known and loved every inch of that ship.

"Ah... nothing too bad, really," Roantree caught herself. "It was nothing you couldn't expect from someone used to the Enterprise."

"What did he say?"

"Oh, just that he was surprised it had gotten off the ground, and he was worried that--"

"He said what?!? Why that -- I'll break his arrogant neck!"

"No, no, he didn't really mean it. He apologized right after, and he only said it because he was overwrought and desperate for the moon-mission to succeed."

"It was still a lousy thing to say! I'd have knocked his teeth--"

"Cool off, Annie. You know better than that. Jim has treated us fairer than anybody else in this universe. Except for that one crack he's never been arrogant with us, never laughed at our customs, never underrated us, never treated us like poor relatives."

"Well, that just makes me wonder more about the others. Why do they treat us like exhibits in a carnival? Why did they give us a ship in such rotten condition? The Enterprise at its worst wasn't in such bad shape as the Galilei."

"Now who's being arrogant? The Galilei's a far better ship than the Sunfire was, but after the Enterprise, you think she's a comedown."

"After the Enterprise, she is a comedown," Bailey grumbled, but looked away.

"There. See? You've gotten spoiled, being used to Jim's ship. All right, so the same thing's happened to Earth and all the other settled Human worlds in the Alliance. Their history was a lot easier than ours. They've got Science we've never dreamed about. They've had it so easy for the past two hundred years that they haven't had time to think about living on the edge of survival. They've had time and opportunity to fool around with trivialities, play with things -- and ideas -- that would be disastrous if people weren't padded and protected by all their wealth and strength and numbers. So there: it can happen to anybody. That's just one of life's little annoyances. We can put up with it; Mother knows, we've survived far worse."

"Life's little annoyances', huh?" Bailey eyed her narrowly. "I think there's more to it than annoyance. I've got a creepy feeling that they're holding out on us, lying to us, about something important."

"Holding out?" Roantree blinked at her and leaned across the desk. "Sure, they're holding out on a lot of technical info and things, stuff that they sell to other planets. They can't give us their trade information until the whole co-op agrees on it. They told us that. What's wrong with it?"

"Technical info and things... yeah, things." Bailey took another leisurely swallow of her drink. "When Quanna and I went to the Enterprise to get those radio parts, I took a good long look at the supplies. I recognized some of the stuff in there, lots of stuff -- components and modules and whole systems sections to spare. A lot of it was the same gear that we'd asked for at the Starbase -- and the people there told us they were all out of it."

"What?" Roantree asked, drink stopped halfway to her mouth.

"You heard me. Now we know what the Enterprise has been through. We know what shape she was in when we found her. Big Jim and Monty and even Citizen Computer-Ears told us she was in bad condition and needed lots of work and replacement parts. So how come a beat-up ship has got all that spare gear lying around -- and the Starbase says they've got none?"

"Maybe..." Roantree set her glass down untouched. "Maybe they'd already given it all to the Enterprise, cleaned out their stock on Jim's ship..."

"Why his ship and not ours?"

There was a long moment's silence as Roantree stared at her Mechanic, thinking all that over. "No phasers..." she said slowly, "Not enough radio channels, not enough computer information... even though there are countless dangers out there -- pirates and slavers and tyrants and space-monsters... and that Thug ship, the Pershing, thought it could shoot us down with no trouble. We... must have looked like sitting ducks! Do you think...?"

"I think these Alliance people are ingrates, Jen. I think we're an embarrassment to them, being such backward country cousins. We saved their whole galaxy for them, but I think they're too stingy -- and ashamed of us -- to repay us properly."

"They don't want to pay the piper... so they're deliberately leaving us helpless, hoping some danger or other will get us. You believe that?" Roantree glared furiously at Bailey. "No! That's too damn crazy! Don't you think Jim, at least, would tell us that if it were true?"

"Well..." Bailey retreated a little before that look. "Maybe he doesn't know what the others are up to. Maybe that Spock is keeping it from him. He doesn't like us, you know."

"He seems to like me enough," Roantree frowned.

"But he does not care for the rest of us," Quannechota cut in, "Particularly not for myself. It was he who locked up the information in the computer. If his word carries much weight with the Starfleet co-op meeting, I doubt that they will agree to give us their knowledge."

"You really think they'd be such ingrates as that?"

"They may be as fearful as that, and unwilling to put us on equal technical footing with themselves," Quanna considered. "There is a possibility that they may actually be afraid of us. We seem to possess a strength that they have lost, values they have forgotten, survival skills and knowledge that they would rather not know of."

"Their odd squeamishness..." Roantree rubbed her jaw with her tattooed hand. "They do all their fighting with stunners or phasers, can't deal with the mess that a shotgun makes... or talk straight about breeding... Mating and killing, life and death, treated like dirty secrets! And we drag all that out into the light of day, whenever we're among them."

"I also have a faint but troubling impression," Quanna added, "that not only do they wish to keep some of their information from us, but also that they wish to keep us from their people -- as if we might contaminate them in some mental fashion."

Roantree looked from one to the other. "Just how bad do you think this is?" she asked. "How much of this is only turning our griefs and disappointments on a handy scapegoat, and how much is real?"

"Hard to say," Bailey admitted.

"I would suggest a safety measure," Quannechota offered. "Let us make a habit of taking our walkie-talkies with us whenever we are in their presence, and leaving the receivers open. In this way, all of us will know of any incidents that may occur in the presence of any one of us. The Starbase people will not notice or overhear, since their communicators operate on a much higher frequency."

"All right," Roantree agreed. "I'll pass that word around as soon as everybody's had some sleep -- and time to get over the shocks we've had in the last twenty-four hours."

"I've got an idea, too," Bailey added. "While we're getting repaired and loaded for the trip out to this new planet, let's make damn sure we've got all the equipment the Enterprise has. If we can't get phasers and info and communications gear from the Starbase, let's get it from the Enterprise."

"How? Steal it?"

"If necessary. But I think I know a better way."

"Do it, then."

"Will do." Bailey finished her drink, stood up, tossed her empty spacesuit over her shoulder and walked out. Roantree waited until the door was closed before turning to give Quannechota a searching look.

"Well, Quanna," she asked, "What do you think?"

"I think that Bailey may very well be correct. It was unrealistic of us to expect that people living in a happier, healthier and wealthier society would necessarily be more virtuous also."

"Not all of them, anyway." Roantree thoughtfully drained her glass. "Doc McCoy's been good to us, and Scotty. Spock may not get along with you, but he's been pretty decent to me. And Jim, of course..."

"Perhaps not as much as we thought."

"What? Not Jim? What do you mean?"

"Jenneth, he was so desperate to come home, to find his friends alive again, he may have exaggerated the glories of this universe -- and minimized its faults -- in order to gain our help."

"Jim, misrepresent -- No, no way." Roantree shook her head firmly. "He never said much about this universe in the first place; we learned it from the computer. He just confirmed what we found out."

"It was he who put the first locks on the computer, if you will recall."

"And we got around them! All he hid was the business of alternate universe, time-lines, where he'd come from and how he'd gotten there. He admitted to that, when we asked him about it."

"Jenneth, it might be that he let us draw our own conclusions about this universe, and then did nothing to disillusion us."

"Jim wouldn't do that," Roantree insisted, eyes snapping green-tinged. "He couldn't lie to me if he wanted to, not with the mind-link between us."

"Perhaps he has misled himself." Quannechota's eyes grew distant and absorbed. "He would not be the first to believe what he wanted to believe, and then misled others thereby."

"Quanna, I believe you're jealous." Roantree watched her, eyes narrow. "Now that he's home, he spends more time with Spock than with you. You've told me that he sometimes calls you by his wife's first name. Bedamn, you've never been jealous before -- but I think you have reason for it now."

Quannechota actually blushed, and looked away. "It is... not impossible," she admitted. "The unreasonable exclusiveness of the marriage customs here seem designed to produce guilt and jealousy. Perhaps I have been somewhat affected."

"All right, so a bite of the old Green-Eyed Monster is making you overly suspicious -- that, and the snotty way some of these people treat us. That's no reason to go overboard and suspect Jim. Neither is Bailey's grief for her daughter any reason to think that Starfleet is trying to get us killed. I agree that there may be a lot of folk about who just don't want to pay the piper, and it's wise to take precautions against getting stranded in space with a broken-down ship and no replacement parts. Still, there's no reason to blame Jim for any of this. He's on our side if anyone is."

"If anyone is?" Quannechota echoed.

"He's on our side!" Roantree insisted. "I ought to know my own brother... my other self, rather. How the hell can you lie to your own self?"

"It is possible."

"Not Jim. Not me." Roantree put her glass aside, flicked on the desk-console viewscreen and selected a view of the stars outside -- with the Enterprise in the foreground. "We can trust him," she repeated. "He's me, after all."

If You Really Are My Brother, Then You'd Better Start To Pray

Enterprise to Starbase #12
Stardate 5952.4, Kirk reporting:

WE ARE RETURNING TO STARBASE #12, ACCOMPANYING THE GALILEI, WITH ALL HANDS. WHILE ACCEPTING OUR GIVEN REASONS FOR NOT CONTACTING EARTH, JENNETH'S PEOPLE ARE DEPRESSED AND ILL-TEMPERED. GREAT CAUTION MUST BE USED IN RETAINING THEIR GOOD WILL UNTIL THEY HAVE SETTLED ON THEIR ASSIGNED PLANET. ALL STARFLEET PERSONNEL SHOULD BE WARNED NOT TO ANTAGONIZE THEM. FOR EXAMPLE, THEY ARE VERY ANNOYED AT PRESENT THAT THE COLONIZATION SUPPLIES ALLOTTED TO THEM DO NOT INCLUDE LIVESTOCK. THIS OVERSIGHT MUST BE CORRECTED AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.

Kirk to McCoy, Confidential Note:

BONES, TELL QUANNA ABOUT CLONING PROCEDURES AND THE TISSUE SAMPLES IN THE BIO-LAB. GIVE HER ALL THE HELP YOU CAN.

McCoy to Kirk, Confidential Note:

WILL DO, JIM. WE'VE GOT SAMPLES FROM THOUSANDS OF DIFFERENT SPECIES ALL OVER THE GALAXY, AND CELLS ENOUGH TO POPULATE A LARGE SOLAR SYSTEM. DON'T WORRY; I WOULDN'T LET JEN'S PEOPLE STARVE.

"Why no livestock?" Jenneth Roantree glared down at the overweight little clerk in charge of supplies. "We're supposed to have enough to colonize a whole planet. You say there are no more supplies coming in before we leave. We need livestock. Now where are we going to get it?"

The clerk sweated under his light uniform. He didn't appreciate her stare, or her questions, or his position. The Anarchists had been moody and short-tempered ever since their return to the base, and Starfleet had no intention of wasting valuable animals on these psychos, and here he was caught in the middle. "Well, ah..." he stalled. "We did manage to get you some animals, you know..."

"Sure. Horses, cattle, sheep, goats, pigs, chickens, ducks, geese, and a couple of odd beasties from a few other worlds: two of each. Male and female. A grand total of twenty animals. By the Mother, that isn't enough! We'll need a wider gene-pool, whole herds, to settle an entire world. We're running a colony-ship, dammit -- not Noah's Ark!"

"I - I'm sorry, but that's all we have. Shipping live animals is difficult, you know. The supply convoy probably didn't have room for any more. Uh..."

"Hellwithit!" snapped Roantree. She turned on her heel and left. Behind her, the supply clerk wilted visibly and rummaged in his top desk-drawer for his tranquilizers.

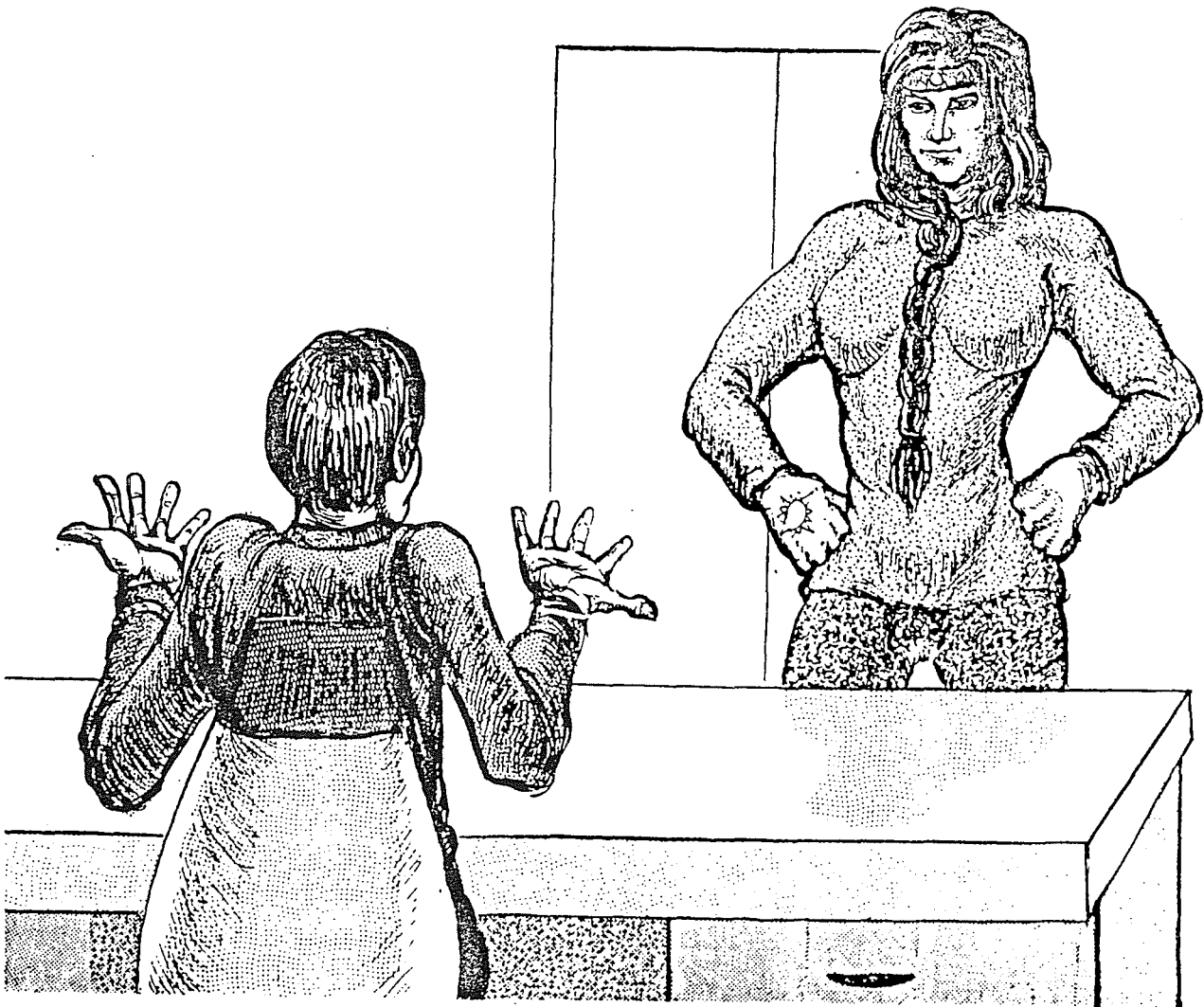
Quannechota was waiting out in the corridor, and fell into step with Roantree as she plodded toward the personnel-transporter room. She said nothing, only waited.

"No luck," Roantree answered the unspoken question. "He says that's all they have. How's your hunting been?"

"Somewhat better. Dr. McCoy has given us tissue samples of several hundred different animals, currently being stored in the Biology Department's cold-safe. The Galilei has very little lab equipment, but with my current requests from the base we should have a proper cloning laboratory in working order within the week."

"We were hoping to leave in three days... Well, I'll explain the delay to the others. Won't improve tempers any. Can't you get the lab set up any faster? Ask Spock for help."

"Jenneth, I have already asked him. He refuses. He has made it quite clear that he wishes to have as little to do with me as possible."



"Damn personality-clashes," Roantree sighed. She glanced up the corridor and smiled to see the Vulcan in question coming right towards them. "Well, speak of the devil! You go on ahead, Quanna. I'll see if I can't talk him into helping. Catch you later. Hey, Spock!"

At Roantree's call Spock flinched, then caught himself, carefully composed his expression and dutifully went to meet her. "Greetings, Coordinator," he intoned neutrally. "May I be of help to you?"

"That you can." Roantree amiably took his arm. "We need your help setting up a live-stock cloning lab on the Galilei. With you on the job, we can get the lab ready in two days and sail on the third. Can you spare us some time?"

"Regrettably, I cannot." Spock tried to pull away from Roantree's innocently disturbing touch, but couldn't manage it without notice. "I... have other tasks of higher priority than construction of nonessential--"

"'Nonessential' like hell! Starfleet didn't give us anywhere near enough livestock for the colony. We'll have to clone embryos on the way, or we won't have enough when we arrive. We need that lab, Spock."

"Insufficient farm animals?" Spock puzzled. "I thought you were already supplied from the base. How many animals did they give you?"

"All of twenty," Roantree sniffed. "Two each, of ten species. Not enough for a respectable zoo, let alone a planet. For a good genetic mix, we need much more. Dr. McCoy gave us lots of good tissue-samples and technical info, but we don't have the equipment installed yet. We can't spare enough people for the installation, not that any of us have done such work before. If you'll help, we can get it done in two days and won't have to postpone our departure. What do you say?"

"I will help if my du...work-load permits," Spock conceded, reminding himself to scold McCoy for giving the Anarchists the tissue-samples without permission. The doctor had been overstepping his authority with lamentable frequency in the past few weeks.

"Thanks, Spock." Roantree turned her dazzling smile on him, much resembling Kirk attempting to charm an undecided female. "And will you help guide us through the first cloning, too? Pick any animal you want, so long as it's nothing as big as an elephant. I'd kind of like a cat, myself. Every ship should have a cat."

"Not an elephant?" Spock asked, a bit bemused. "Surely you would have room for an elephant or two, and they are the most useful animals for clearing ground."

"True, but we don't have proper room for one in the cargo barge. After all, that whole convoy didn't have room for two dozen animals. When can you come to the cloning lab?"

"Most probably at 1830 this evening," ...no room? In an entire convoy? Illogical...

"Fine. See you then." Roantree genially squeezed his arm, released it, and walked off toward the personnel-transporter room.

Spock watched her go, idly rubbing his arm, mulling over this odd new information. He knew the size of the last convoy to Starbase #12; it could have easily brought whole herds of livestock, rather than just twenty. Obviously Starfleet did not intend to give the Anarchists more than a token number of animals. Why? He weighed the pack of tapes he was carrying, noted the time, concluded that he could spare half an hour to research the question, and set off for the nearest computer terminal.

Project Tap R-277, Roantree recording:

HAD A LONG TALK WITH QUANNA, ENDING IN A SAD, HALF-DRUNK FAREWELL. NO WAY AROUND IT; SHE'S LEAVING FOR GOOD. SHE'LL COME WITH US ON THE GALILEI, BUT ONCE WE'VE ARRIVED AT NEW-HOME SHE'LL GO BACK TO THE ENTERPRISE... AND JIM. I'D GO WITH HER IF I COULD, BUT LITTLE HOPE OF THAT. I'M THE ONLY TRAINED COORDINATOR WE HAVE, ASIDE FROM QUANNA, AND THE COLONY'S GOING TO NEED ME FOR A LONG TIME. EVEN IF I DID CUT OUT AND JOIN STARFLEET, THERE'S NO CHANCE I'D GET A PLACE ON THE ENTERPRISE; SHE'S ALREADY GOT A COORDINATOR. SO THIS WILL BE THE PARTING OF THE WAYS FOR GOOD. DAMNED HARD, AFTER SO MANY YEARS TOGETHER... BACK TO BEING ALONE AGAIN. STILL, I'LL HAVE A WORLD -- AND MY CREW, AND A SHIP, AND STARS. I OUGHT TO BE CONTENT WITH THAT, I OUGHT TO BE CONTENT...

Officially, Scott was inspecting the Jeffries tube. In fact, he was hiding in it. There were questions that needed settling, and he wanted to be alone to think them over, and the inside of the tube was one place where nobody would bother him.

"Jim, I'm sorry..." he whispered, resting his forehead against the cool metal. "Nue fit ta be any ship's captain, an' I did badly at it." Kirk had forgiven, but the failure was still there. And Annie... He shuddered, but forced himself to look at it. How shall I repay that? What proper penance to free me of it? ...They leave in two days. Time runs short. Decide!

"...Monty..." The word echoed up the tube, spoken by the one voice in the galaxy that Scott least wanted to hear.

"She's here! Lord..." Scott clutched tight at the hand-holds and made himself look back, down the tube. "Annie."

"I thought you'd be here." Ann Bailey climbed up the tube toward him, gripped the narrow hand and foot-holds, levered herself up until their eyes were scant inches apart. "There's something I've come to ask of you, Monty. Not a favor: payment on a debt."

Is this it? Enough? Scott hoped wildly. "Name it, then."

"We need weapons, Monty. Phasers, photon torpedoes, all the things the Enterprise has. And proper shields and a complete radio. No more of this helplessness! I've learned -- we've all learned -- how much these so-called 'civilized' people look down on us, and how little they like being indebted to us for saving their high-and-mighty necks. They're ingrates, Brother. The condition of the Galilei is proof of that. I believe they'd be just as glad to see us dead and gone!"

"Whot? Ye think--"

"I think they wouldn't risk killing us themselves, but sending us out ignorant, blind and unarmed among all the dangers of the galaxy -- now that would be another matter entirely."

"Aye..." Scott whispered. "It makes such excellent sense." He knew the countless weaknesses of the Galilei, the strange reluctance of the Starbase, the odd lack of information about the Anarchists' supposed new world -- and yes, they did add up to a very ugly pattern. His hands shook, and not with fear. "They might. They... just... might!"

"I for one don't intend to take that meekly. Put the weapon in my hand, Monty. Put the shield on my arm. Give us claws to fight with, eyes and ears to spot the enemy coming. Help us be more than sitting ducks! Give us a halfway decent chance to survive, if we have to make our own way through the stars."

Go your way? Scott considered. Aye, go your way! Go fast and far, and trouble me no more! I'll help you do that... "I'll do it," Scott agreed, not looking away. "And let that settle all debts between us."

Stardate 5955.7. Personal Log. Spock recording:

I HAVE DISCOVERED WHY STARFLEET DID NOT WISH TO GIVE THE ANARCHISTS SUFFICIENT LIVESTOCK FOR A FARMING COLONY. ACCORDING TO THE ADMIRAL'S AIDE, "THEY WON'T KEEP ANIMALS WHERE THEY'RE GOING." INDEED. UPON DISCOVERING THE IDENTITY OF THE ANARCHISTS' ASSIGNED PLANET, I AGREE THAT IT WOULD BE ILLOGICAL TO WASTE THE LIVES OF ANIMALS BY TRANSPORTING THEM THERE.

LEILA'S WORLD...

I MUST ADMIT IT IS A LOGICAL SOLUTION TO THE ANARCHIST PROBLEM. WHETHER OR NOT IT IS ETHICAL IS ANOTHER QUESTION, WHICH I CANNOT ANSWER. CERTAINLY THE ANARCHISTS WOULD BE HARMLESS, HEALTHY, EVEN HAPPY THERE... AS I WAS. THEY COULD ALWAYS BE REMOVED AND RESTORED TO THEIR NORMAL MENTALITY SOMETIME IN THE FUTURE, IF SOME BETTER SOLUTION WERE FOUND. IT IS NOT AS IF WE WERE LEADING INNOCENTS BLINDLY TO SLAUGHTER...

DOES JIM KNOW? HE MUST; HE HAS HAD THE ORDERS FOR WEEKS.

DOES HE AGREE? HE MUST; HAD HE PLANNED TO DEFY THE ORDERS HE WOULD HAVE TOLD ME. ...OR WOULD HE? I DID NOT TELL HIM MY PLANS CONCERNING CHRISTOPHER PIKE...

... I WANT THEM GONE, BUT THIS ...

Kirk was lying on his bunk taking a quick before-dinner nap when the sound of the door-buzzer awakened him. "Come," he half-yawned, then remembered that he'd left the door locked. "Damn," he muttered, getting up to open it. But the door whooshed open before he could reach it. What the hell?! Then he saw who was standing in the doorway, and understood.

"Oh. Hello, Jenneth. Come sit down. Want a drink?"

"Don't mind if I do," said Roantree, dropping into the nearest chair. She looked tired.

"Been working hard?" He handed her a glass and settled on the other chair.

"Hell, yes. A million and one last-minute details, getting the ship and cargo ready." Roantree emptied half her glass in a casual gulp. "I've been too busy to think. You know, this is the first chance to sit down and talk to you in weeks."

"Well, I've been busy, too." You wouldn't believe how much!

"Have you been feeling it too?"

"F-feeling what?"

"Dragged-out, tired, detached, a little sad. As if all this--" she waved vaguely toward the bulkhead and the whole sky beyond. "--were sort of anticlimatic."

"Ah, Jenneth," Kirk laughed with relief, "After all we've been through in the last year, it'd be strange if we didn't feel that way. We've fought our way through things that should have killed us a dozen times over. We're a little dazed and off-balance to find ourselves out from under the pressure and still alive. A logical reaction, as Spock would say."

"Yeah, logical." Roantree finished off her drink in another swallow. Kirk wordlessly refilled her glass. "Reaction to a lot of things: losing my children, my home, my world, my husband, even Quanna... and now Earth."

"Jen..."

"Oh, I'll survive. Don't worry. I've done it before. Mine was a hard world, and I'm no stranger to grief. I know that enough time and living will fill in the holes. I'll survive as long as I have someone, something to care about... like my crew, my ship, this whole new world we're getting..." She lifted her glass in a perfunctory salute. "It's just that... well, all those losses at once are a bit hard to take. I'm not bouncing back very fast."

"I know. I've felt that myself once or twice." Kirk studied the depths of his brandy glass, remembering. A noncommittal memory itched. He grinned wryly, considering that Jenneth was the only woman he knew who would take this the right way. "It wouldn't hurt to get laid."

"Amen," Roantree laughed with something of her old warmth. "Can you think of any likely choices? I don't know how to approach your people without scaring them, and the only one of them who's made any moves toward me is Spock. I'm--"

"What?!" Kirk gaped, then laughed mightily. "Spock -- Heh! --oh Lord, that's- Jen, I think you may be mistaken about him! Ho! Ho! Sorry, no offense. Remember, he's a Vulcan and his customs are very different from yours or mine."

"Ah well, he's too virginal and prissy for my tastes, anyway." Roantree shrugged and nursed her drink. "I honestly can't think of anyone around that I want just now. Strange. I haven't slept so long alone since I was fifteen."

"Fifteen?! Uh..." Kirk quashed a twinge of jealousy. "Well, once we leave here and get under way, things may change. Just a few more hours until then: can you wait that long?!"

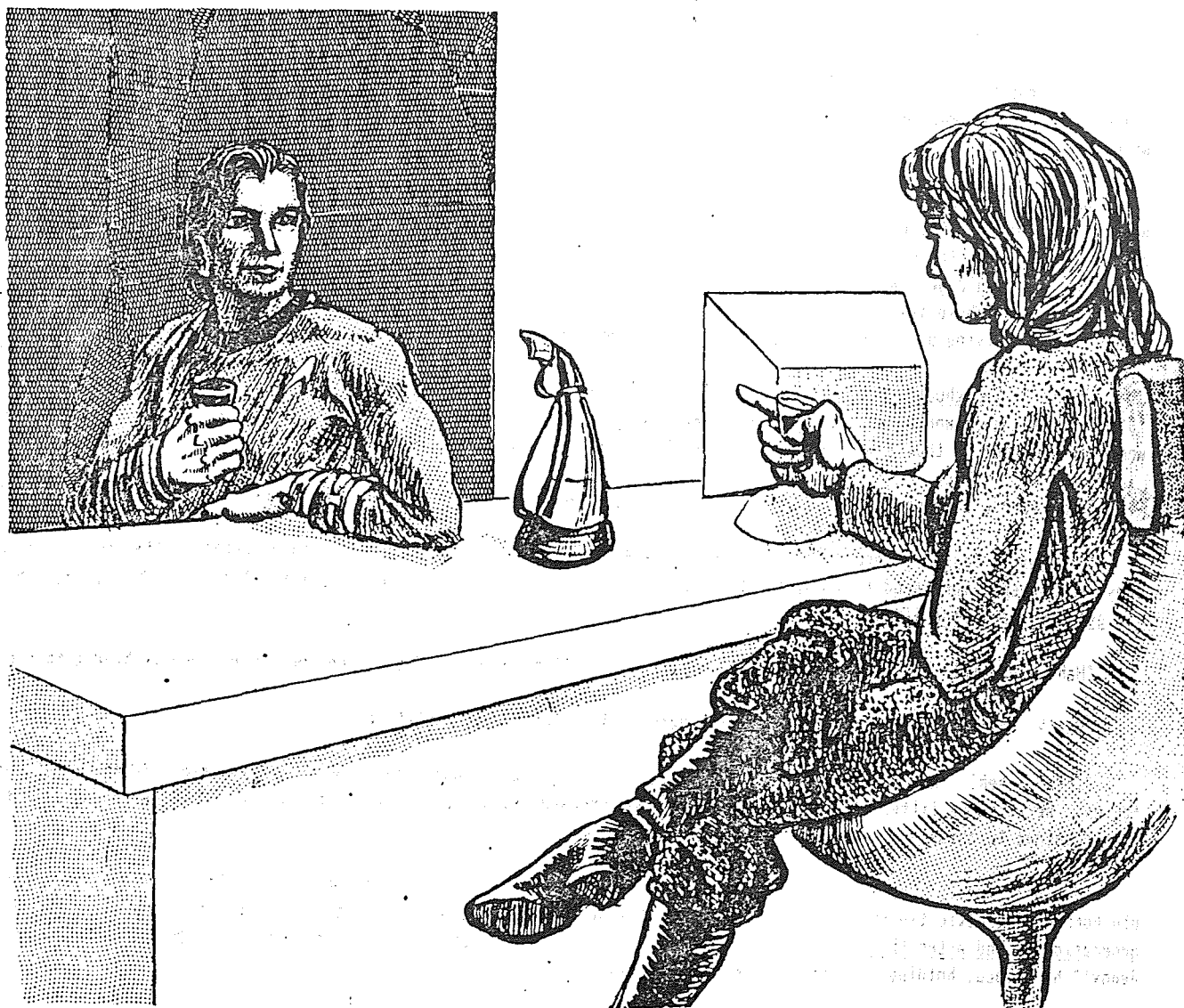
"Of course. Hell, the big departure-eve party starts in a couple of hours, and that ought to cheer everyone up."

"I'm sure it will." ...both crew and the base personnel attending...Lord, it may leave the base in smoking rubble! To say nothing of the Enterprise... "We ought to take a nap beforehand, just to be sure we're ready for it."

"True." Roantree swigged down the last of her brandy, but didn't smile again. She clearly had something else on her mind.

"Jen, what else is bothering you?" Kirk ventured. "It is... me and Quanna?"

"No, I've gotten used to that." Roantree stretched and stood up, hooked her fingers in her belt and briefly gnawed her lower lip. "Jim, we have reason to believe that your people despise us."



"What? But -- No! No, they don't. Dammit, Jenneth, how do you think we could have put together the whole Fed- the whole Alliance if we were intolerant of other people's customs? Good god, we've managed to get along with people so alien, so different--"

"But we're not aliens, Jim. That's just the problem." Roantree transfixed him with one of those eerie stares that seemed to go right through him. Kirk hastily shielded himself from the mind-link, wondering what she was up to.

"We're your other selves," she explained. "We're too close for you to be calm, cool and objective about us. Everything we do is a commentary on yourselves, a proof of what you could do if you wanted to. We're not quaint foreigners that you can tolerate and smile at and walk away from; we're the dark sides of yourselves, and you can't lose us or forget us or ignore us. So of course all your terribly-restrained and hyper-civilized folk despise us -- and fear us too, I think."

Kirk didn't try to answer that one. Unbidden, unwelcome, like a vengeful ghost from its grave rose the memory of

himself split by the transporter. Superimposed over Jenneth he saw the image of himself, his dark half, his own face and body driven by the mind of an unrestrained beast. ...It's true, he admitted, grinding his teeth. Yes, it would be all too easy to hate you for it!

"There, you see?" Roantree's smile was sad and knowing. "You're the kind of people who fear your own Beasts. We're not. I ought to feel sorry for you, hating part of yourselves like that."

"We'd deserve it!" Studied without fear, the Beast isn't really that terrible. I know that now... but who else has learned it? Look what we've done to ourselves! "So why don't you pity us, then? That makes us a lot weaker and more miserable than you."

"Because I spare no pity for people who try to hurt me and mine." Roantree's grin faded. "Misery loves company, and will do the damndest things to get it. That's why whole countries full of miserable people used to invade and conquer their neighbors, back in the bad old days. Light knows what they do now. I fear your people's spite, Jim. I think they'd do anything they could get away with, just to be rid of us. The condition of the ship they gave us, the insufficient food-animals, the withheld information and supplies -- they all point that way: 'take the scraps and go away'. I'll bet this planet they're giving us is 'way the hell out in the boondocks, too. Right?"

"Right." You should only know how right! "I'm sorry, Jen. It was the best I could get for you." Could be worse! "Still, it's a good world, and now you have a half-way decent ship to get you there. Now, is that such a bad deal? A whole world of your own -- that's what you were after when this crazy adventure began, isn't it?"

Roantree did a quick double take. "Of our own? I thought you said, before, there were some other people on it."

"Oh, yes." Oops. Careful. "Well, there are a few, I think. Ah, provided that they haven't pulled out and gone home: they, ah, weren't very good farmers, and there was some talk of them leaving for an easier place..." That'll excuse it when you get there and find it empty...

"Hah, wonderful! Back to our old problem of a too-small gene pool! Hmm... No, we could probably handle that now."

"What? Have you recruited people off the base?" I wouldn't put it past you!

"Them? heh! No, we've got the cloning-lab all installed and operating. Spock helped, even did the first operation for us. We've got a litter of kittens growing in the incubator right now. Cute little things... No reason we have to limit the technique to animals."

"You mean you... you mean to clone yourselves?!" Kirk could feel the reaction rippling through him, the generations-old horror of genetic tinkering -- and deep under that was a wild elation. They could -- A whole planetfull of them, in one generation! And after that... Kirk leaned back in his chair and laughed until his ribs hurt. "Oh, you- you'll show them, Jenny!" he gasped, holding his sides. "You'll show them all!"

"Damn right." Roantree cocked her head at him. "You know, Jim, you don't like these people either, do you?"

Kirk blinked at that. "No..." he answered slowly. "No, I guess I don't."

"And that's why you left Earth for Space, wandering from star to star, never settling down."

"Could be..." Of their own accord, his eyes turned to the viewing port, the image of stars in the endless sea of night. "Could very well be."

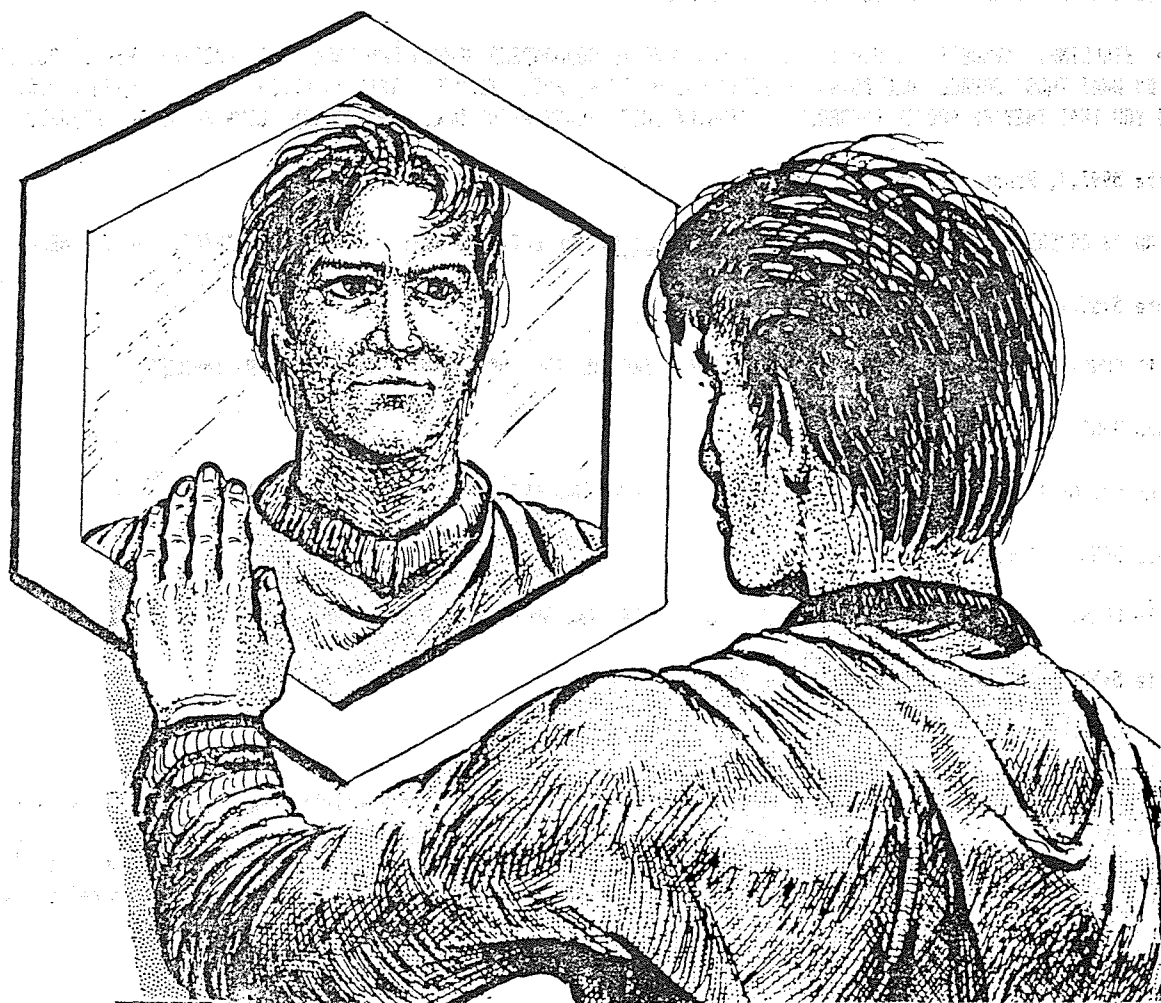
"Hmm. Well, see you at the party." Roantree turned and strolled to the door. "If you plan to sleep, try not to dream."

"I know."

Kirk waited until the doors had closed. Then he got up and went to the corner cabinet, beneath the mirror. He tapped

his fingers on the top for a moment, then pulled open the upper drawer. There were some items in there he hadn't cared to look at since he'd first discovered them, the day he got out of Sickbay. But I'll face them now, he decided, grimly pulling the drawer open. The objects were hidden under his shirts. He lifted them out carefully and looked at them: a battered old whiskey flask with his name freshly engraved on it, an old-style fountain pen bearing his father's name, and a fragile crown of dried oak leaves. Not everything stayed in jenneth's universe. I remember too well...

He dropped the momentos back in their hiding place, shut the drawer, and raised his eyes to the mirror. The face that looked back seemed subtly changed, not what it had been last year. You're thinner, James I., and your hair's too long... Older? Younger? Deeper eyes... and a little more wise. He remembered himself younger, much younger, a terribly dedicated Academy student, a cadet before that. Jimmy Kirk, terribly intense. Good Boy: at fourteen, trying to live down a Misspent Youth... at twelve, the town Bad Boy... the least-liked kid in Lake West Okoboji, Iowa. Sure! I'd play hooky from school to go explore the oak woods, or watch the eagles soaring over the Lake... envying their freedom, sharing their loneliness... only people spoiled the scenery. He vividly remembered the yellow construction machines, digging foundations for suburban tract-housing, tearing up the buffalo grass. Goddam whining narrow-minded thoughtless people... Oh, Dad, come take me away from this rotten town! ...But he died... A wordless image: empty sky above the oaks. No escape, stuck here... All right! Bad kid you call me, and bad kid I'll be! Revenge... He smiled, remembering and still gloating. Picked the Principal's pocket. Sneaked the watch onto the porch of the town whorehouse. Miss LaBelle hated the Principal's wife, made sure she heard about it. Whee! The Principal never heard the last of it. Sweet revenge! ...until Sam told on me... Why did he do that? He didn't tell when I did worse...



Wait a minute. What worse? Try as he might, Kirk couldn't remember what his crowning Sin had been. With effort, though, he could remember why the memory was blank. For the first time in more than twenty years, it angered him. They had no right to that! Locking my memories -- Damn them! 'Modern therapeutic techniques' -- Bull! So take that Kirk Kid and slap him in military school to straighten out -- fine, I was happy to get away, have a chance at Starfleet... That was all I needed! Why the hell the rest of it? Counseling sessions, sleep-learning, ethics-implantations, hypno-training... 'When I think back on all the crap I learned in high school' -- goddam sugary-benign-it's-all-for-your-good-dear-brainwashing! Oh yes, they made me dutiful and hard-working and eternally guilty and fearful of 'my dark side' -- and it wasn't... goddam... necessary! He slammed his fist down on the top of the cabinet, making it jump and rattle. Jenneth was a five-year-old killer, but nobody played 'therapy' with her -- and she's the better Captain! Damn! Damn! Damn!

He noticed his reflection glaring at him and paused to stare back. Do my eyes always change color like that when I'm angry? he wondered. He studied the reflection, rumpling his hair and narrowing his eyes until he could clearly see the Beast, the Imposter, that dark side of himself that he'd finally met face to face in the dark corridor at the heart of the ship... Yes you're still there, he acknowledged. Still strong. Still looking for a chance to break free... But I'm not afraid of you anymore! It occurred to him that this was one thing he'd gained out of the whole dark year. Nearly a lifetime of proper shame and fear, all undone... No I'll never fear you again. Let me remember that.

Slowly, almost gently, he raised his hand and touched the mirror. The dark reflection did likewise.

"Brother," he said.

Stardate 5955.7, Komack to Mendez, Confidential and Urgent:

ENOUGH STALLING, MENDEZ! I DON'T CARE IF YOU HAVE TO COMMANDEER SENSOR EQUIPMENT FROM PASSING SHIPS, BUT KEEP CONSTANT WATCH ON WHAT THOSE SAVAGES ARE DOING -- EVERY ONE OF THEM, EVERY MINUTE! THIS IS PRIORITY RED. REPEAT, RED. DO I HAVE TO REMIND YOU THAT THEY'RE PROVEN DANGEROUS? TIGHTEN THOSE SCANS RIGHT NOW, DAMMIT! AND GIVE ME HOURLY REPORTS!

Stardate 5955.7, Mendez to Komack:

SCANNING AS ORDERED. AT PRESENT, THE CREW OF THE GALILEI ARE EATING DINNER. DO YOU WANT DETAILS OF THE MENU?

Stardate 5955.7, Komack to Mendez:

DON'T BE FUNNY. YOU KNOW DAMN WELL I WANT RELEVANT INFORMATION, NOT DIDDLY-SHIT. KEEP ME INFORMED.

Stardate 5955.7, Mendez to Komack:

PROBLEM: 90% OF THE HOURLY REPORTS ARE DIDDLY-SHIT. WHAT HAS PRIORITY, REGULAR DATA OR IMPORTANT DATA?

Stardate 5955.7, Komack to Mendez:

MAINTAIN CONSTANT SCANS. RELAY RELEVANT DATA ONLY. PASSING SHIPS WILL ASSIST YOU.

Stardate 5955.7, Personal Log, Mendez Recording:

KOMACK, TU ERES UN HIJO DE PUTA.

The departure-eve party began loosely after starbase dinnertime, and the celebrations started even more loosely on both ships and the base itself. Most of the base personnel planned to attend, and many started partying before they got far from their rooms. Discipline went out the porthole. Base Security personnel threatened mutiny. The Security Chief resigned. Commodore Mendez barricaded himself in his quarters and refused to answer all local calls. Personnel-transporter rooms filled with waiting lines that backed up into the corridor.

So it happened that Spock, coming back from the base computer center with much on his mind, ran into one of the two people at the base that he most wished to avoid. The moment he saw Quannechota he tried to hurry past her to the end of the queue, but she stepped out of line and firmly led him aside.

"Citizen," she clipped, "You may avoid me all you wish after you have answered my question. The Starfleet Cooperative has had weeks in which to decide; have they or have they not agreed to give us the locked-up knowledge in the Enterprise's computer?"

"No, not at this time." Spock was too distracted to bother phrasing his reply diplomatically. Also, it took effort to shield his mind against her.

"Are they likely to agree to it in the near future?" Quanna insisted.

"Not soon. It is highly improbable that the current attitude will change before you reach your destination." After that, of course, you will lose all interest.... (Shield!) How would the spores affect her? It would be interesting to observe...

"What is the purpose of this delay?" Quanna's face was immobile, but her eyes flared. "They have no reason to fear trade competition from us. This hesitation indicates an unwillingness to repay us fairly." The pressure of her anger surged heavily at Spock's mental shields.

"You have been repaid!" Spock snapped, painfully irritated. "You have been given a ship, a world and the resources of a Starbase -- far more than you could have ever attained by yourselves. It is illogical to demand more. Now, if you will excuse me, I have work to attend to." Leave me alone! He took a quick step back, turned on his heel and marched off to the end of the line.

"Ingrate!" Quannechota whispered through tight lips.

There were a few other Anarchists in the queue near her, and their immediate destination was the Galilei. Quanna stepped on the platform with them, but as soon as they materialized on board, she went off down the corridor in a different direction from the others. A few minutes' walk brought her to the Galilei's bridge, which was otherwise empty. She paced once around it, her gaze traveling over the consoles, noting the signs of Citizen Scott's new additions: new control modules for phaser banks, photon torpedoes, cloaking device, communications channels... She frowned at the last. The communications board had taken an inordinate amount of time, and wasn't finished yet. Scott had admitted to having trouble with it, but still hadn't let anyone help him with the installation. At last, he had told her not to expect complete communications before they reached New-Home. Quannechota could not understand why simple installations should take so long; perhaps the withheld computer information could explain it. But why then, she wondered, did he warn me not to mention his 'new addition' to anyone, lest the Starbase people hear of it and be displeased? Why all this petty intrigue? She sat down at the computer console, weighing exactly what she meant to do. ...Perhaps, the intrigue is not so petty... Good thing we too can play such games. She scampered her fingers over the buttons, quietly singing to herself.

"There's something happening here.
What it is, ain't exactly clear.
There's a man with a gun over there,
Telling me that I ought to beware...
Everybody stop now. What's that sound?
Everybody look what's goin' round..."

It took only a moment to set the Galilei's computer for direct ship-to-ship reception. Quannechota considered her handiwork, sailed briefly, went back to the transporter room and beamed over to the Enterprise.

Stardate 5955.8, Spock to McCoy:

AM UNABLE TO LOCATE THE CAPTAIN. DO YOU KNOW WHERE HE IS?

McCoy to Spock:

HE'S DOWN IN THE CARGO HOLD, ENJOYING THE MAIN PARTY, ALONG WITH DAMN-NEAR EVERYBODY ELSE. WILD PARTY IT MUST BE, TOO; I'VE ALREADY HAD A COUPLE BLACK-EYE AND SCALP LACERATION CASES, WHICH IS WHY I'M NOT DOWN THERE MYSELF. ENJOY!

The noise in the cargo-hold could be heard all the way down the corridor, which was also crowded. Spock steeled himself against the onslaught of noise before venturing into the room, but he soon discovered that the noise was the least of the outrages.

The lights... Someone had arranged the lights to strobe, in varying colors, speeds and locations. Someone else -- probably one of the Anarchists -- had built a very real fire in a large brazier in the center of the room. Two or three of the Anarchists sat near the fire, both attending and hypnotized by it, occasionally throwing in handfuls of powders that made the flames leap up in different colors. The total effect was dreamlike and savage.

Disguised themselves... Many of the celebrants were dressed in extravagant costumes, to the point where it was difficult to tell the real non-Humans from Humans in disguise, and vice-versa. All known ages and cultures seemed represented, as well as characters from legends, fables, and a few outright fantasies. It was as if he had walked into a cyclone-center of colliding timelines, where dreams walked and mixed histories paraded, hobnobbing cheerfully without order or reason.

...Refreshments?! One whole side of the enormous room was lined with serving-tables displaying food, drink, breathables and suspicious oddities. The food-buffet included only one properly vegetarian dish -- an admittedly-enormous salad, made of fruits and vegetables from all over the known galaxy, surrounded by several dozen small bowls of different dressings. Most guests paused there only briefly. The next table displayed literally dozens of dishes made of animal flesh, from tiny birds baked in sweet glassy shells up to a whole roasted bovine carcass with jellied-fruit eyeballs. The pastry table was scarcely less offensive; most of its cakes and tarts were molded to the shape of fanciful animals. The largest of them, covering half a table, depicted a mythical hero slaughtering a dragon-like animal whose extensive tail had already been devoured by hungry admirers. The bar-table bore six enormous punchbowls, their respective fluids displaying the colors of the spectrum in order and quite obviously all alcoholic or worse. On the last table, between the incense-pots, stood a shameless brace of water-pipes from which a dozen people of assorted species were puffing happily. To judge from the dilation of their eyes, the pipes were not burning tobacco. At the very end of the table stood several small dishes filled with vari-colored tablets, capsules, leaves and resin coated flowers. Guests wandered past, selecting pills here and leaves or flowers there, popped the same into their mouths and strolled away giggling.

...And games. Beyond the tables capered groups of dancers, Blind-Man's Buff players, pillow-fighters and others engaged in even more questionable activity. To one side, dressed in kilt, tartan and full regalia, a heavysset Human male was happily and noisily tuning up an obviously-authentic bagpipe. Spock recognized him with a pang of something near horror. Mr. Scott! How could you? He looked away.

...and the decorations are most ominous. On the far wall someone had hung a tapestry behind which, to judge from the wriggling, wheezing and moaning, several individuals were engaged in an elaborate mating ritual. The tapestry itself, Spock noted, depicted a sphinx. The elegant animal body seemed to move of itself, the jewel-bright godlike head nodding and smiling with secret knowledge. For one disorienting instant Spock wondered why anyone could ever had missed the answer to the Sphinx's famous riddle; the structure of the creature itself gave away the game. ...animal body, god's head. What better symbol for a human? Or a... No. Enough. face and mind rigidly set, he picked his way through the party like a tourist in hell, searching for his Captain.

Kirk wasn't hard to find; he was sitting by the end wall, wearing his regular uniform, holding a drink and grinning happily. Beside him sat Quannechota, puffing a suspicious-smelling pipe and actually sailing. At his other side, Jenneth Roantree sat positioned before a small forest of microphone-stands, carefully adjusting and tuning her 12-string.

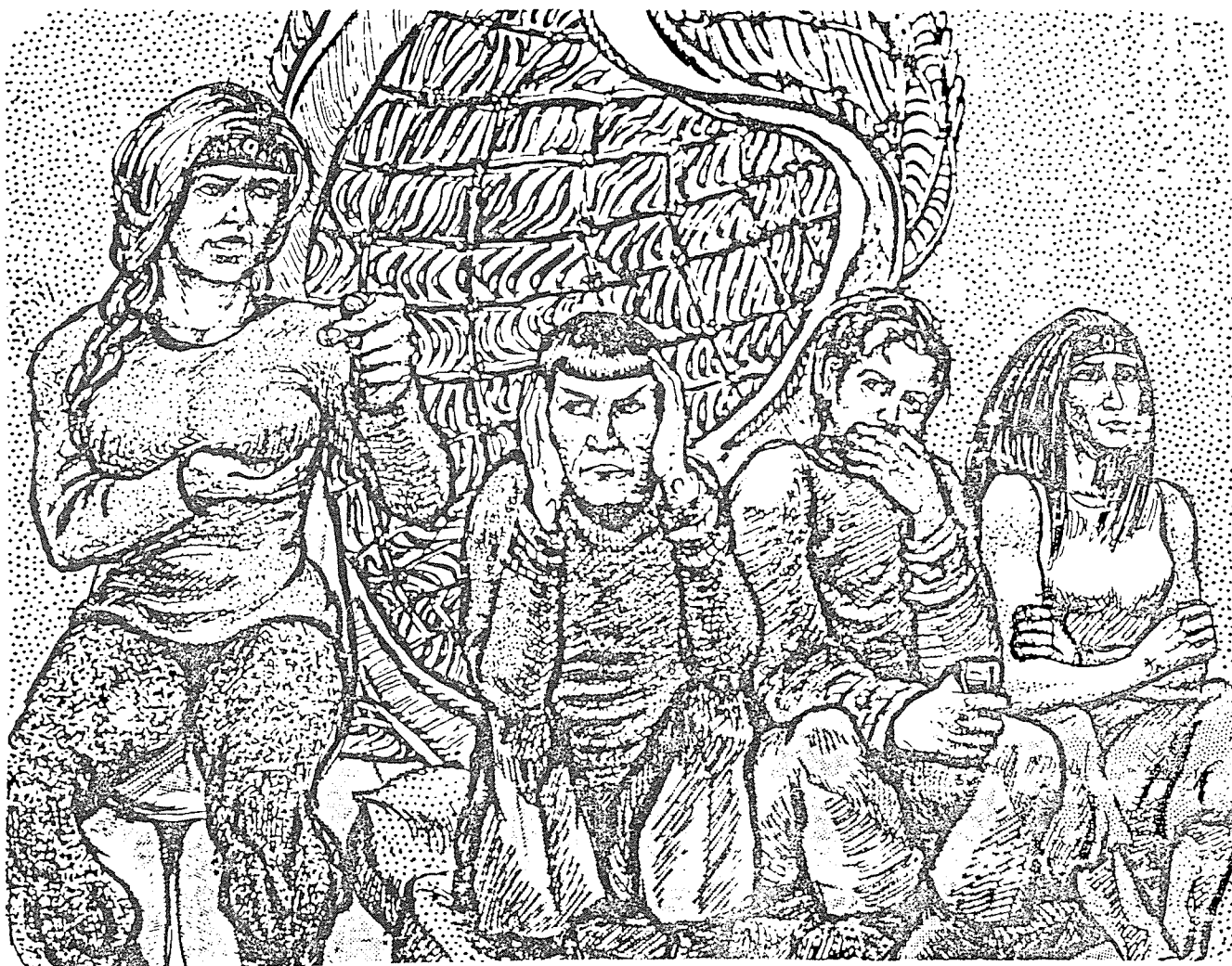
Behind them, the time-twisted platinum jet-grill of the Sunfire glittered in the shifting light like an abstract idol to a baleful god. Spock quietly approached and settled himself on a cushion between Roantree and the Captain.

"Hey, careful!" Roantree warned amiably. "That's no pillow; it's my backpack."

"My apologies." Spock pulled the loaded pack out from under him and replaced it with a real cushion. "Is this... all of your personal gear?"

"All but the grill and the 12-string," Roantree shrugged. "I didn't bring much with me. No problem to cart it around, in case I need anything." She turned her attention back to her instrument, minutely turning one key. Feedback noise yowled through the walkie-talkie on her belt. She grimaced and turned its reception-volume down.

Watching her, Spock was struck afresh by how terribly impoverished Jenneth's people were. She herself was no younger than James Kirk, but all she owned in this universe were a musical instrument, the clothes on her back, no more personal items than would fill a medium-sized backpack... and of course the jet-grill behind her. The object was made of solid platinum, and was worth a tidy sum of credits on any civilized world... But what good will it do her where's she going? What little she owned -- her few possessions, her skills, her ethics, her technical knowledge, her memories -- would come to nothing when the first pod-flower blew its spores in her face. She would be robbed of everything but her life. All Starfleet's gifts -- knowledge, materials, the ship, the planet itself -- were treacherous, mere props, bait in a gigantic Confidence Racket. This is an illogical reaction! he reminded himself. There are dangerous and disruptive people who must be neutralized for the good of society. This way is easiest and most merciful... but not Option #4... Jim, do you consent? He turned to look at Kirk, and met the darkly inscrutable eyes of Quannechota. He snapped his mental barriers down tight. It was impossible even to hint at the problem in her presence. How can I make her go away?



Just then a fight broke out. Two of the nearby Anarchists, their shirt-fronts dark with spilled drinks, were yelling incoherently and slugging at each other with clumsy fists. Other guests turned to watch, some worried, some amused. No one attempted to interfere. Spock half-rose, looking to Kirk for instructions. Kirk waved him down and glanced toward Roantree.

She sighed, put down her 12-string, got up and ambled calmly toward the fight. "Outside, outside," she said cheerfully. "Don't fight in here. You could smash things and spill food. Go outside."

The combatants, apparently too drunk or worse to notice her, went on grappling and slugging. One of them managed to successfully blacken the other's eye. The second sank his teeth into the front one's ear. They both howled. An incomprehensible flurry of blows followed, then they broke apart a space and whipped knives out of their boots. A few onlookers screamed.

Roantree shrugged, picked up a chair and threw it. The chair soared, arced gracefully over the ring of spectators, tumbled, and landed precisely between the fighters, catching them both on their knife-arms. Both dropped their knives, grabbed their wrists and wailed. Roantree coolly walked into the parting row of onlookers, picked up their knives and shoved them back into their owners' respective boots. "Better go see the doctor about those hands," she suggested kindly. "Be sure to get something for the pain."

"Nah, I don't need a painkiller." One of the ex-battlers tried to put on a brave face. "Me neither," agreed the other, not to be outdone. They glared weakly at each other, turned and plodded out.

The remaining crowd milled about uncertainly, wondering what had happened and why. "No problem," Roantree explained. "I just changed the competition from a knife-fight to an endurance contest." She parted the crowd, picked up a cup of electric-blue punch from the bar-table and strolled back to her previous seat in front of the jet-grill.

Kirk, much to Spock's dismay, sailed at Roantree in open admiration. "Neat trick, Jen. Is that the way you usually break up intercrew fights?"

"Not usually," she said, picking up the 12-string. "When they're not so stoned a few words will do. At most, they'll go off to an empty place and take a few witnesses and duel to first blood."

"First blood?" Spock cut in. "Do not such battles end in death?"

Roantree turned to look at him, eyebrows raised. Quannechota openly sneered. Kirk, intrigued by the question, didn't notice her.

"Well, it sometimes happens between lifelong enemies," Roantree explained, "And once in a while folk with real grudges will fight until one's incapacitated, but usually first blood is enough. Most personal fights are done without weapons, anyway. Hell, 90% of all personal squabbles are purely verbal: yell, scream, insult, squall until tired. Nobody gets hurt."

"I would be interested in learning how you have managed to restrain human aggressiveness to such comparatively harmless levels."

Quannechota rolled her eyes heavenward, and busied herself with knocking the ashes out of her pipe.

"... 'Restrain'?" Roantree put down her 12-string and scratched her chin. "We don't 'restrain' much of anything. People just prefer it that way."

"I find it difficult to believe." Spock sounded almost outraged, Kirk noted, as if some basic tenet of this universe were being questioned. "Are you unaware of the normal progression of unrestrained anger? From emotional arousal to insult, then to attack, injury, slaughter and war. How do you prevent this?"

Roantree stared at him for a second, then leaned back and laughed. "Ho! Ho! Lord Wolf and all his fangs! Heh!

'Normal progressions' -- sweet Mother's tits, where in hell is that normal? Ah, excuse me, Citizen, but you talk like an ignorant pacifist. Haw! Haw! Haw!"

Kirk gave her a wide-eyed stare. Quanna smiled. Spock looked definitely insulted.

"Oh well, maybe you are one. Sorry." Roantree wiped tears of laughter from her eyes. "I bet you come from a place where people never let themselves get angry, so you wouldn't know any better. Look, among Humans anyway, there is no such progression. People get angry with each other for countless different reasons, and there are just as many different things they can do with their anger. Just because you're mad at someone doesn't mean you want to kill him. Hell no! More likely you'll just want to insult him, or incapacitate him, or make him look ridiculous, or prove him wrong, or beat him up, or drive him away, or prove publicly that you're better at something than he is, or whatever. There are very few situations where people want nothing less than killing! As for war, that's something altogether different: that's community against community, and except for the bad old days when governments forced their people to go out and fight, it can't be done for anything less than a community-wide threat -- famine or drought or massive thieving or whatever. Personal anger has precious little to do with it. Look, why should wanting to kill one person make you want to kill several? Usually, someone so hot to kill a particular enemy won't turn aside for anything as irrelevant as killing strangers. And why should he? Hatred that intense is as personal as love; you can't really hate or love what you can't know."

"Jesus," Kirk muttered, glancing around the room.

"That... is a most unusual defense of aggression..." Spock stumbled.

"Defense?" Roantree gave him no chance to find a logical escape. "Why should 'aggression' need defending? What's wrong with it?"

Spock opened his mouth, then shut it again. He looked stunned.

"Well, it's been blamed for a lot of our wars," Kirk attempted rescue. "Many people believe that our, uh, tendency to fight leads us to harm each other on a grand scale..."

"Leads to, 'leads to'," Roantree almost sneered. "Only for people willing to be led! Sure, smart tyrants can lead stupid people around by all sorts of otherwise-harmless things. Do you hate iron because wicked folk once made slave-chains of it? Nah. 'Aggression' is damned useful for keeping us alive -- otherwise Nature wouldn't have given it to us. How else would you fight off things that try to kill you? There are plenty of those, you know, and you have to fight them sometime; you can't always survive by running away."

Kirk couldn't think of anything safe to say. Spock just shook his head and looked dazed. Quannechota studied him briefly, raised her eyes to Roantree's and shook her head. Roantree thoughtfully gnawed her lip.

At that moment the music changed. A long screech from Scott's finely-tuned bagpipes split the air. Several voices cheered, and someone turned off the background music. Scott grinned, swirled his tartan dramatically -- nearly showing off his well-muscled thighs -- and swung into a rousing chorus of "Donald MacGillivrae." Numerous guests, most of them Anarchists, hurried up to form a dance-line. A wide smile of inspiration and relief lit Roantree's face. "There's a fine tune, Spock," she said, getting to her feet. "Come dance with me. It's an easy one; you can pick up the steps quickly." She took his hand and tugged hard.

"I- I would prefer not to, Citizen," Spock demurred, trying to free his hand.

"Spock..." Roantree tightened her grip and leaned over him so that no one else could hear. "Listen, this is important. You have a bad reputation among my people. There are many who think you a mean-minded prig, an arrogant and sanctimonious joy-hater with nothing but contempt for us. They think you're the foremost of those who want to cheat us out of our reward -- because you locked up the computer."

"What?" Spock's eyebrows shot up to his bangs. "I did not mean--"

"Don't tell me; tell them! I want to show them that they're wrong about you. Get up an dance with us. Dammit, do

something to prove that you don't think we're a walking plague!"

"Very well." He stood up. "How does one perform this dance?"

"It's a simple Grapevine with a jump and three stamps added..." She showed him. He carefully copied the motions. "Yes, that's it. Good. Now follow me into line." As she half-dragged him across the floor, Spock threw a last glance over his shoulder. Kirk was leaning back on his pile of pillows, his face turned away, talking to Quannechota. Spock almost called to him, but Roantree pulled him into the line of dancers and someone took his free hand, drawing his attention to the business at hand. He nodded brief greeting without looking up, and turned his attention to the dance steps.

"Jim," Quannechota insisted, "It is not a small problem. Spock does actively dislike me. If we must remain on the same ship for any extended length of time, there will be trouble between us. I don not seek this, but I must warn you of it. It would be best if he and I could live and work well-separated."

"Wait a minute!" Kirk flared. "Are you telling me you want him transferred off the ship?"

Quanna shrugged. "We must put distance between us. Is there any other way?"

"Well, forget it! We've worked together for years, he's the best First Off -- uh, the best scientist in the fleet, and I couldn't do without him. You two will just have to settle your differences, make some sort of arrangement, and learn to get along. I'm not going to part with either of you. Is that clear?"

"I will attempt it," Quanna sighed. "Do you realize how much your rigid marriage customs add to this problem?"

"Huh? No. What do you mean?"

"Eh, never mind." 'None so blind as those who refuse to see' ...Indeed, this is not paradise. She looked toward the dancers.

The steps weren't difficult, and after two verses Spock was proficient enough at them to raise his head and take note of the other dancers. The woman holding his other hand was wearing a wolf-skin headdress. The man beyond her wore deer antlers. In the wildly-shifting light the costumes seemed part of their bodies. They made no hostile gestures and said nothing, but they studied him with eyes as wary as a wild beast's. They danced with hands joined and arms rigid, in perfectly matching rhythm, so that the snake-curved line was a single unit. The momentum was cumulative; the stamp/leap at the end of each passage took the line further across the floor than any single dancer could have jumped alone. Spock had the eerie impression of being caught up in vast, dark, ancient forces: earthquakes, cyclones, forest fires. The worst of it, he realized, was that the forces were not chaotic, not truly irrational, but moved with a complex and hidden logic of their own, purposes well-known to themselves but unfathomable to him. ...Perhaps because you fear to look too closely... the temporary sphinx seemed to smile at him.

I am not afraid! I am Vulcan! Spock raised his chin and stared defiantly as the tapestry, the fire, the dancers, and deliberately contemplated their meaning. Within a few deductions he regretted it. A celebration of the animal, the primitive, the emotional... but not necessarily irrational. To them, that is not contradictory! ...But why? To what purpose? The pipes skirled and the dancers leaped, carrying him with them across ten feet of dark floor. Wolf-fur rippled. Antlers tossed. Leaves and flowers in garlands quivered. Spock turned a sharp glance to Roantree, wondering precisely what she had meant by dragging him into this particular dance. She wasn't looking at him. Smiling, eyes aimed forward, she moved through the steps with the same practiced ease and confidence she had shown in breaking up the knife-fight. What are you? He wondered. You that ride so happily, so calmly, so efficiently on your primitive, emotional, aggressive, animal nature... like a skier on an avalanche... a surfboard rider on a tidal wave...

The tapestried sphinx ballooned forward as a laughing Anarchist rolled out of hiding, and the motion stretched the beast's paws forward. Spock flinched back, but the line of dancers carried him inexorably ahead. He remembered the famous answer to the sphinx's riddle, and was suddenly angry. 'Ignorant pacifist'? 'Prig'? 'Sanctimonious contempt'? And how dare you, you shameless humans, have such contempt for me? For emotional restraint? For logic? For Vulcan? How dare you be so successful at it?! I mean...

Right there, Spock saw the pit opening before him; the whole dark complex of questions he had never asked, never considered, always refused to see, and knew very well he could not answer. That, he realized, was the greatest danger inherent in Jenneth's people. They could raise such questions.



No! Not now! I will not -- (Control!!) The mind rules... I am Vulcan... Spock gritted his teeth and concentrated on wrestling his mental lid back on his genie-bottle. It took nearly as much effort as had shutting off the pain from the Denevan nerve-parasites. His eyes disfocussed, unseeing, and he danced through the song as rigidly as a robot.

Quannechota, watching, shook her head. "I do not think this will endear him to anyone," she murmured. "Does he see no value in being generally liked -- or at least disliked less? Ah, fool."

The end of the song took Spock by surprise. A hand gripped his shoulder and shook him, not gently. "Hey," said Roantree. "You can come back now. It's over."

"Yes..." Control. I am in control. Calm... Spock reset his face, went back to his assigned cushion and dropped onto it. He took a few deep breaths, checked his pulse and finally dared to look up. The first thing he saw was Kirk, looking worried.

"You all right, Spock?" Kirk kept his voice low. "You look a bit shaken up."

"I am quite well, thank you. They did me no harm." Is my voice steady?

"You did not do yourself much good, either," Quannechota remarked, noting regretfully how Mr. Scott happily accepted the thanks, praises and drinks offered by the grateful dancers.

"The opposite, if anything," Roantree sourly added, settling back with her 12-string. "I tried to make you look less hostile to our fold, but you acted like a nervous virgin in a porn palace. Anyone would think you expected to be thrown down and raped any second."

Spock turned pale as suddenly as if he'd been slapped.

"That's enough, Jenneth!" Kirk jumped to his defense. "That was a really uncalled-for insult! Just because he isn't used to people who make a public show of how fierce and horny they are--"

"Gods assembled!" Roantree slapped her thighs in disgust. "What are you shrinking violets afraid of now?"

"Who's afraid? You're jumping to conclusions again. Dammit, Jenneth, if you'd just stop flexing your muscles for a minute and try to act a little more like a woman--"

"More like a woman!" Roantree exploded. "More like a woman?! Mother of Mares, what do you want?! I've had dozens of lovers, two husbands, half-a-dozen children that I nursed myself, and I've outlived nearly all of them and could start over again! I've never met man or woman I couldn't wear out, at table, in battle, or in bed! I can out-eat, out-drink, out-fight and out-fuck anyone you can bring me! I've got hips as wide as a wagon-wheel, a cunt like a wolf-trap, and tits as big as your head! And you tell me I should be 'more like a woman'?! What the hell, should I bear a whole litter next time?!"

"Oh, never mind!" Kirk gave up. "Just forget I said anything." Jesus, if you put them together they really would be as big as my head...

A small, but ominous rattle of laughter and applause broke in on them. Roantree looked around and saw who the audience was: a large contingent of her crew, within earshot, having heard the whole thing and grimly approving. Quanna looked worried. That meant trouble. ...So much for peace-making, Roantree sighed to herself. How can I keep them from a plain brawl before the night's out?

"Hey, Jenneth!" called a voice from the serving-tables. "Sing the 'Ballad of Roland'!"

Oh-oh, thought Roantree, peering to see who'd asked that one. It was Jean Battre-le-Diable, standing near the punch-bowls, coolly holding a large dark-brown bottle labeled 'Old Snakebite.' Lord of Light, he's planning to pour that into the punch! Sweat beaded up on her forehead. Knock off Jim's crew, the whole Starbase... we could loot what we wanted, run off, go a-pirating... Who else wants that?! She noted Ann Bailey standing near the table, pulling off her wolf-skin headdress and smiling tightly at Jean. You too? Bad enemy... No dammit! We aren't as bad off as that! Roantree thought fast, her fingers slippery on the strings as she dutifully played the opening run of the solemn melody.

"The Ballad of Roland'?" Spock asked Quannechota, attempting to be coolly intellectual and understanding none of this. "Is this a variant of the 'Chanson de Roland', preserved from medieval French legend?"

Quannechota grimly shook her head, concentrating on the crowd's reactions as Roantree began to sing.

'Roland was a warrior from the land of the midnight sun,
With a Thompson gun for hire for fighting to be done.
He made the deal in Denmark on a dark and stormy day,
And he went down to Biafra to join the bloody fray.'

"Nothing medieval about it, Spock," Kirk commented, a trifle worried. This was obviously a song with meaning, and he wished he knew what that meaning was. "...I don't like the sound of that."

"Intriguing," said Spock, immersing himself in irrelevant details as he often did when tense. "The historical references appear to place the song in the third quarter of the twentieth century. No doubt it was preserved as a portable relic of the collapsed civilization, that was not maintained in our timeline."

"Not exactly," said Quannechota.

'Though sixty-six and seven they fought the Congo War,
With their fingers on their triggers, up to their knees in gore.
For days and nights they battled the Bantu to their knees,
They killed to earn their living, to help out the Congolese.'

Across the room, Uhura snapped her head around and pursed her lips in fierce annoyance. Kirk grinned humorously, remembering that Uhura was Bantu herself. If the song were meant to rake up old animosities, it was doing fairly well.

"I cannot perceive any significance beyond a typical human bloodthirstiness," said Spock nattered. "Your 'Songs of Power' technique strikes me as imprecise and variable. Or is this some sort of mnemonic device for encapsulating memories of historic events?"

"Oh, hush!" Quannechota snapped at him. "Can't you see I'm busy?"

"Really!" Spock arched an offended and self-righteous eyebrow.

'His comrades fought beside him: Van Owen and the rest.
But of all the Thompson gunners Roland was the best,
So the CIA decided they wanted Roland dead.
That son of a bitch Van Owen blew off Roland's head.'

"Phew! Graphic, aren't they?" Kirk joked nervously. "Like some of the grimmer Grimm fairy-tales ..." He really didn't think this was just a gruesome old piece of entertainment. Quannechota, knees drawn up and chin resting on them, looked as if her attention was a parsec away. She didn't respond even when Spock deliberately needled her about the "unnecessarily crude language" of the song. All around them Anarchists raised glasses, pipes and fists in salute as they joined enthusiastically on the chorus.

'Roland the Headless Thompson Gunner,
Norway's bravest son:
They can still see his headless body stalking through the night
By the muzzle-flash of Roland's Thompson gun...'

"It appears to be a familiar sort of ghost-story," Spock went on. "A later version of the Headless Horseman, I believe. Interesting."

For once, Kirk devoutly wished that Spock would shut up.

'Roland searched the continent for the man who'd done him in,
He found him in Mombassa, in a bar-room, drinking gin.
Roland aimed his Thompson gun. He didn't say a word,
But he blew Van Owen's body from there to Johannesburg.'

Kirk winced, vividly remembering the sight of Pennington blown to pieces by massed shotgun fire. He could still see it from two viewpoints; one distant and horrified, one close and satisfied. It occurred to him that vengeance had its uses too.

"So, this is a classic human ghostly-vengeance ballad, of the sort traditionally told on Halloween," Spock continued brightly. "How typical of human societies, where justice is often imperfect, to be satisfied with fantasies of vengeance. Most illog--"

"Spock, shut up." Kirk couldn't help cutting in. "This isn't Hallowe'en, and Jenneth's people do believe in personal vengeance."

Spock gave him an unmistakably hurt look.

'The Eternal Thompson Gunner still wanders through the night.
All those long years later, he still keeps up the fight.
In Ireland, in Lebanon, in Palestine, in Berkley--
Patty Hearst heard the burst
Of Roland Thompson's gun
And bought it.'

The last heavy chords were drowned in whoops and cheers. The noise didn't sound particularly friendly.

"A ghost story turned into a cautionary tale?" Spock ventured. "The vengeful ghost evolves into a spirit of revenge in general. Hmm, an interesting reference to another song of the period, there at the end: the legendary Lady Who's Buying a Stairway to Heaven ends in 'buying the farm', so to speak. A clever pun, if bloodthirsty. The moral seems obscure..."

"It's about vengeance for betrayal," Kirk analyzed gloomily. "I sincerely hope that Jenneth has an answering song."

"She does," said Quannechota.

Sure enough, Roantree was already stroking another series of chords out of her 12-string, while her gaze flicked back and forth between Bailey and Jean Battre-le-Diable. This time the tune was steady, calm, somewhat sad, and hinting at a vast patience. The words were directly to the point.

'Be not too hard, for life is short
And nothing is given to Man.
Be not too hard when he's sold or bought,
For he must manage as best he can.'

"Quanna," Kirk whispered, "Does that refer to us?"

"It means that she is attempting to defend you," Quanna admitted.

"I see no logical need for such defense," Spock grumbled.

"Oh, what a fool you are!" Quannechota burst out, annoyed past endurance.

Kirk wouldn't have believed it if he hadn't seen it, but Spock actually put his ears back. "In-deed," he seethed.

'Be not too hard when he blindly dies,
Fighting for things he does not own.
Be not too hard when he tells great lies,
Or if his heart is sometimes like a stone.'

"Madam," said Spock between clenched teeth, "Your position is not improved by your continuous rudeness."

"My rudeness?" The insult was enough, at last, to draw Quannechota's attention away from the singing. "And have I treated you like an ignorant country bumpkin? Like a poor relation? Like a pitiable savage who must be kept out in the barn lest I track mud across your nice clean carpets?"

Spock drew breath to answer, and Kirk knew right then that he meant to say something on the order of 'you deserve it', and there would be another fight right there in front of all those tense listeners. "Cool it off!" he snapped. "Both of you, get up and go away -- in opposite directions. Stay away from each other until you can think of something polite to say. We don't need another fight."

Spock looked indignant. Quanna took a deep breath, nodded, and quietly stood up. Neither, thank whatever, said anything.

'Be not too hard when he plays the fool,
Or turns from a truth he would not see.
Be not too hard when he acts the tool
For those who will never set him free...'

This time several voices -- including Quannechota's -- joined in on the chorus.

'Be not too hard, for soon he'll die--
Often no wiser than he began.
Be not too hard, for life is short,
And nothing is given to Man.'

As the last chords died away, Roantree set down her 12-string and looked fixedly at Jean Battre-le-Diable. For a moment it was almost quiet in the crowded room. Then Jean shrugged, turned away, and casually stuffed the brown bottle back into his shirt. Ann Bailey likewise turned away went to refill her plate. Quannechota quietly walked off into the crowd. Spock, after a brief glance at Kirk's unrelenting stare, got up and did likewise. Kirk muttered a few choice obscenities as he lifted his nearly-forgotten drink. It had grown warm.

Roantree gave a long sigh, got up and went over to the serving table to get herself a drink. The red punch looked promising. Her hands shook with tension as she lifted the ladle. Close, she thought, leaving tomorrow. Another day or two and I'd have serious enemies up and down the crew... Got to get out. New world, new stars, put everything behind us... Abruptly, her vision blurred. She squeezed her eyes shut, fighting back inopportune tears of long grief and vast weariness. Goddam you, Jim! This world had better be worth it! I'm bloody tired of defending you and yours... against my own people, now. One more insult will finish it. I can't hold back the sea forever! ...This little comedy of ours is going into its last act.

"Coordinator?" asked a familiar voice nearby.

Roantree firmly shoved her assorted miseries to the back of her mind, stood up and looked to see who had spoken. It was Uhura. "Uhm, hello..." Roantree fumbled, surprised. "I didn't know you were here."

"Are you astonished to see me?"

"Well, as a matter of fact, I am. I didn't think a - a 'lady' like you would be interested in a farmers' brawl like this." Careful! No good to insult back...

"Really?" Uhura measured her quarry carefully. Subtleties wouldn't move that rock; sharp truth would have to do, as much as could be revealed. "I'll admit that I don't usually care for celebrations as boisterous as this--"

"Or for people as crude as we are?" Roantree was too tired and depressed to watch her answers for politeness. "You're not alone in that."

Patience! Uhura bit her lip and studied the tall Anarchist woman. The signs of strain and fatigue were there, easy to read, for anyone who knew how to look. "Coordinator," she ventured, "I come from an African people with a history as long and a culture as old as those of any in the world. However, this did not deter other people from looking on my ancestors as savages. For centuries, that was used as a vicious excuse for outrageous plundering, of our resources, lands, even people

-- countless thousands of them, dragged away to die in slavery. The plundering eventually ended, centuries ago, but we still remember it -- along with its miserable excuse. For that reason we have, for the past several generations, gone out of our way to prove how civilized we are. No doubt we are over sensitive on this point, too easily offended by anything that appears backward or uncultured, regardless of its other virtues. I'm not saying that this is right, but don't you think it's understandable?"

Roantree gave her a long, tired look. "It's understandable," she conceded. "What's everyone else's excuse?"

"Cultural differences. Big ones." Uhura suppressed a smile at the fine opening Roantree had given her. "Our history since the twenty-first century has been... quite interesting. The Eugenics Wars and their aftermath left us with considerable problems whose echoes still trouble us. For example, not all the Luddites quit their ideas and became enamored of science; there are still several groups of them running around."

"Religious nuts, too? Like the Martinet?"



"Worse than that. Any violent social upheaval engenders mass hysteria, superstitious thinking, whole beives of nut-cults..." Uhura shrugged expresively, hoping Roantree would take the idea and run with it.

Roantree did. "Don't I know! I saw some lulus back on - on my Earth. Would you believe, Flagellants? Suicide cults? Flying-saucer nuts who spent most of their time building landing strips and full-size flying-saucer models, in hopes of luring down the 'Gods from Space'? Heh! I wonder how they liked it when the spaceships did come-- and they were full of Romulans! Well, that one would have ended in a hurry. Some of the others, though... It's amazing how a nut-cult can last once it's gotten started."

"How true," Uhura pounced lightly. "And a widespread cult's ideas can far outlast the cult itself. There's a fear of science, of course, and the wish to go back to a medieval technology. Then there's the absolute horror of 'genetic tinkering'-- even to the point where parents won't let dangerous recessive genes be tailored out of their children."

"Great Mother, what we would have given for that skill..." Roantree's eyes narrowed.

"And of course there's the old idea that some god or other is angry with people for their stubborn faults, so that people should always be ashamed of themselves and suspicious of their own feelings,"

"I've seen that, too! The Humans of this universe always seem apologetic in front of the non-Humans as if they were born inferior or something. Say, the non-Humans could take real advantage of that..."

"And then there's the fear and hatred of barbarism-- among Humans, that is; non-Humans can be envied for it-- because of their near-barbarism that followed the Eugenics Wars. You've seen the effects of that one."

"But... that contradicts the earlier one about hating Science and wanting to go back to 'simpler times' and all that crap."

"Precisely. Do you see a slight social conflict going here?"

"Uhuh." Roantree noticed that many of her crew had drifted closer to listen. Let them, she grinned. This is getting interesting... So you've got a canyon-gap between the neo-Luddites and the hyper-civilized types, with us caught in the middle. The Luddites hate us because we shamelessly worship Science; the hyper-Civs hate us because we're too crude for them. How nice."

"It gets even prettier when you consider how both groups treat their women," Uhura purred.

"Oh?" Roantree didn't change expression, but her eyes took on a faint green tinge.

"Oh, yes. Consider all the damage done by the Eugenics Wars. Consider that for a long time there was no medical technology to improve the situation, and that long after Science was restored there were still those heavy taboos on any form of Eugenics. How do you think most human societies dealt with that situation?"

"Well, you know how we did it," Roantree frowned. "Other folks, other means: polygamy, polyandry, everybody inspected newborns, everyone who safely could was urged to breed like crazy. Bad breeders sometimes used birth control, were sometimes cast out, in a few places killed..."

"But once science came back to our Earth," Uhura cut in, "Once machinery could take over most physical work, it was possible again to let women spend most of their time breeding, nursing and raising children. It became quite fashionable to do just that-- and nothing else."

"I think I see where this is going."

"Back to the Dark Ages." Uhura smiled tightly. "Oh, women are still allowed to try for any work they want-- but they're hardly encouraged at it. There's the pressure of custom, you know. Women aren't expected to do serious work-- or to take work seriously: only enough to while away the time waiting for Mr. Right to come along, propose marriage, and set

them up for their 'real' work as Wives and Mothers for the rest of their lives."

"Parasitic idlers," growled a voice from the table. Roantree recognized it as Bailey's. "Damn'd fashionable stupidity!"

"Mother of All! How can a society afford to keep half its people idle?" Hot-Trot added from across the punchbowl. "They must be rich as hell."

"And it must be very tempting to be supported all your life, practically worshiped, just for breeding and rearing," Roantree considered. "But what about women who aren't tempted, who want more than that, who want to make something of themselves besides sacred broodmares?"

"As I said, they aren't encouraged." Uhura raised her glass in an ironic salute to the whole Federation. "They're disliked, considered neurotic, pressured into marrying, passed over for awards and positions they deserve... Ah, let me put it this way; there are no female Starship captains. Not in all of Starfleet."

"I see..." Roantree exhaled slowly, through her teeth. "Were you hoping to be the first?"

"Yes," Uhura replied levelly, "But my chances are poor. 'Insufficient training and experience' they say-- after neatly sliding me into a position where I'm unlikely to get either. So it goes with most of the women in Starfleet. I do know one woman, though, who could qualify: one woman in this galaxy with experience and training that nobody can deny."

"Oh? Who is she?"

"You."

There was dead silence around the punchbowl for a full minute.

"So... am I to understand," Roantree finally spoke, "That you would be pleased if I joined Starfleet and tried to become Coordinator of a Starship?"

"Yes, I would be pleased." Don't sound too eager! "Look: you have several years' experience as a... Coordinator, plus six months with a Starship, and the last few weeks refitting a Transport, including repairing the cargo-canister. Of course, you'd have to take some training at Starfleet Academy-- ah, that's our co-op's trade-school-- to learn a little more of our science and history and, uhm, interplanetary social customs. However, that shouldn't take you too long. You have, beyond any shadow of a doubt, the basic qualifications. Would you do it?"

Roantree leaned on the table and laughed. "Lord of Light!" she gasped. "I've just finished saving the galaxy, and now you want me to help reform it??? Wheee!"

"Who better?" Uhura smiled. "I should think you'd be used to great legendary, heroic quests, by now."

"Uhura," a cold voice cut in. Everyone looked down the table to see Spock sliding through the crowd. "I wish to speak to you for a moment. In private, please." His face was properly expressionless, but he radiated disapproval like a chill halo. The Anarchists rolled their eyes knowingly and moved away from him.

Caught!... Keep calm. "Very well," Uhura shrugged. "Shall we speak again soon, Coordinator?"

Roantree nodded thoughtfully as Uhura strolled off to deal with Spock, noting how he took a polite but firm grip on Uhura's elbow as he steered her out of the room. How do Vulcans treat their women? she wondered.

"Jen, what do you make of that?" Bailey asked, leaning close.

"I'm not sure. Could be a lot of things. Perhaps I'd best go ask Jim." She put down her empty glass and strolled back through the crowd to the pile of cushions near the jet-grill, where Kirk sat watching the dancers and looking lonely.

"Hi, Jen," he noticed her. "Did you see where Quanna went? I hope she didn't get the idea I wanted her to leave the party."

"No, I'm afraid I haven't seen her. Maybe she's in the latrine." Roantree sat down and packed up her 12-string, wondering how best to put the problem. "Jim, do you have any idea why Spock should be sore at Uhura?"

"What? Where did you get that idea?"

"I was just talking with her, and he came up looking annoyed, and took her off with him for a private chat."

"Looking annoyed? Spock?" He's been acting odd all evening... I don't like this... "Hmm, which way did they go?"

"Just out. I don't know where."

"Well, I'm sure they'll turn up eventually. Say, is there much of a line at the men's room?" Without waiting for a reply, he got up and walked off looking elaborately unconcerned.

...I somehow don't think he's heading for the john... Roantree pondered, watching him leave. What's with Spock anyway? ...Uhura can tell me, once she gets away from him. Decided, Roantree pushed her 12-string and pack behind the time-warped jet-grill, covered them with some cushions, got up and wended her way through the party. She automatically turned her walkie-talkie back up, wincing afresh at the feedback whine.

* * *

The corridor was crowded. Spock shouldered his way directly across it to the opposite door, which led to a small computer-library auxiliary room. Spock was relieved to find it empty.

The moment the door was closed behind them, he turned on Uhura. "So it is you," he began without preamble. "I had falsely suspected Lt. M'Ress. It is almost inconceivable that an officer of your training and experience should be guilty of such an outrageous violation of orders. What are your motives for this flagrant insubordination?"

"Insubordination?" Uhura batted her eyelashes innocently, but the eyes beneath them glittered like newly-sharpened swords. "'Violation of orders?' Precisely, what orders, Sir?"

"Direct orders from the Captain, forbidding the transmission of dangerous information to the Anarchists-- as you very well know."

"Oh, indeed I know, Sir. As Communications Officer, I've had ample opportunity to study the exact wording of those orders. I have violated none of them. On the contrary, I have expressly obeyed your orders-- to 'acclimatize' our guests to their new universe. In fact, I've been more effective at it than your own Social-Science teams."

Spock blinked, considered that, and changed tactics. "Enticing the Anarchists to join Starfleet will only make them more curious about the true nature of the Federation, and will hasten their inevitable disillusionment. If they discover the truth before they reach their new planet, the results could be disastrous. This danger was thoroughly explained in the orders. You have deliberately risked such a possibility."

"On the contrary, Sir: our orders said nothing whatever about when our visitors should learn the whole truth. Orders do require us to reconcile the Anarchists to this universe as quickly as possible, and in fact suggest that we dazzle them with the wonders of this society so as to make the presence of laws and governments more palatable for them. I have done precisely that."

"And you think that exaggerating the social disadvantages of human females in Starfleet, to a biased observer such as Jenneth Roantree, can be construed as 'dazzling' the Anarchists with 'wonders'? I think that Starfleet Command will take an entirely different view."

"Beg to differ, Sir," Uhura smile toothily. "Jenneth Roantree is a fighter, and she's already noticed the way human females are treated here, and she doesn't like it. A good cause, like feminism, is just the sort of thing to interest her. In a point of fact, I did not exaggerate the social disadvantage of human females; if anything, I downplayed it. Women are socially oppressed in the Federation, Mr. Spock-- particularly in Starfleet. Haven't you ever noticed that our crew is only one-fourth female? Or that very few of those even rank as high as Lieutenant? Or that none of them are in the line of Command? I think Jenneth Roantree is exactly what Starfleet needs."

"Starfleet Command certainly does not agree."

"Starfleet has agreed to take on any of the Anarchists who are willing and able to join. I saw the orders to that effect. No mention was made of the sex of the prospective candidates. Do you deny that Jenneth would make a good Starship captain?"

"That is not the point! That particular order was a mistake, as the Captain has determined." --Lie-- "Our current orders are to supply the Anarchists with colonization materials, to accompany them to Omicron Ceti Th-- to their new world, and to avoid all possible conflict with them. By arousing their indignation you have defied direct orders from the Captain."

"The Captain never gave me any such orders."

"True, Spock. I didn't," said a new voice from the doorway.

Spock and Uhura turned as one, and saw Kirk standing by the door.

"Captain..." Spock gulped. "I did not hear you enter."

"Been standing there long?" Uhura asked pleasantly.

"Long enough. Lieutenant, why don't you go back to the party? Spock, stay awhile. I want to speak to you."

"Uhura nodded demurely, and scrambled. Kirk waited until the door shut behind her.

"Spock," he said gently, turning to the Vulcan. "What the hell's gotten into you?"

"I- I beg your pardon?"

Kirk stepped closer. "Do you realize that you were shouting just now?"

"...Shouting?"

"Very unVulcan." Kirk peered thoughtfully into the distinctly worried brown eyes. "You've been acting nervous, snappish, even downright emotional for the last few weeks. What's the matter?"

"I... I have been concerned about the growing laxity of discipline. Lt. Uhura, as I just discovered, has been attempting to persuade the Anarchists to join Starfleet. No doubt that is the cause of the peculiar order which you received at--"

"That's a minor problem, easily dealt with. I'm much more concerned about the odd behavior of my First Officer. Come on, Spock; there's nobody here but me. What's upsetting you so much?"

"I..." ...had not realized it was so obvious... "...am most probably suffering the effects of overwork. These past few weeks have been exceedingly difficult."

"Few Weeks?' Not so many days, down to the last decimal point? I didn't think that you were that badly overworked, Spock. McCoy hadn't noticed either, and you know how sharp-eyed he is. Are you sure that's all?"

"Ah, also, there is the lingering effect of the converging time-lines. We have all been affected thereby." Spock abstractly noticed that his hands were sweating.

"Not quite all of us. Some people suffered from double memories, but most weren't affected at all. It seems that they didn't exist in Jenneth's universe. You reported earlier that you didn't have any double memories, and what I learned from that universe's Sarek, you didn't exist there, either. Of all the people on the ship, you're the one I thought would be least affected by the change."

"I- Our guests are extremely difficult to deal with. They- they grate on my sensibilities." Oh, if you only knew!

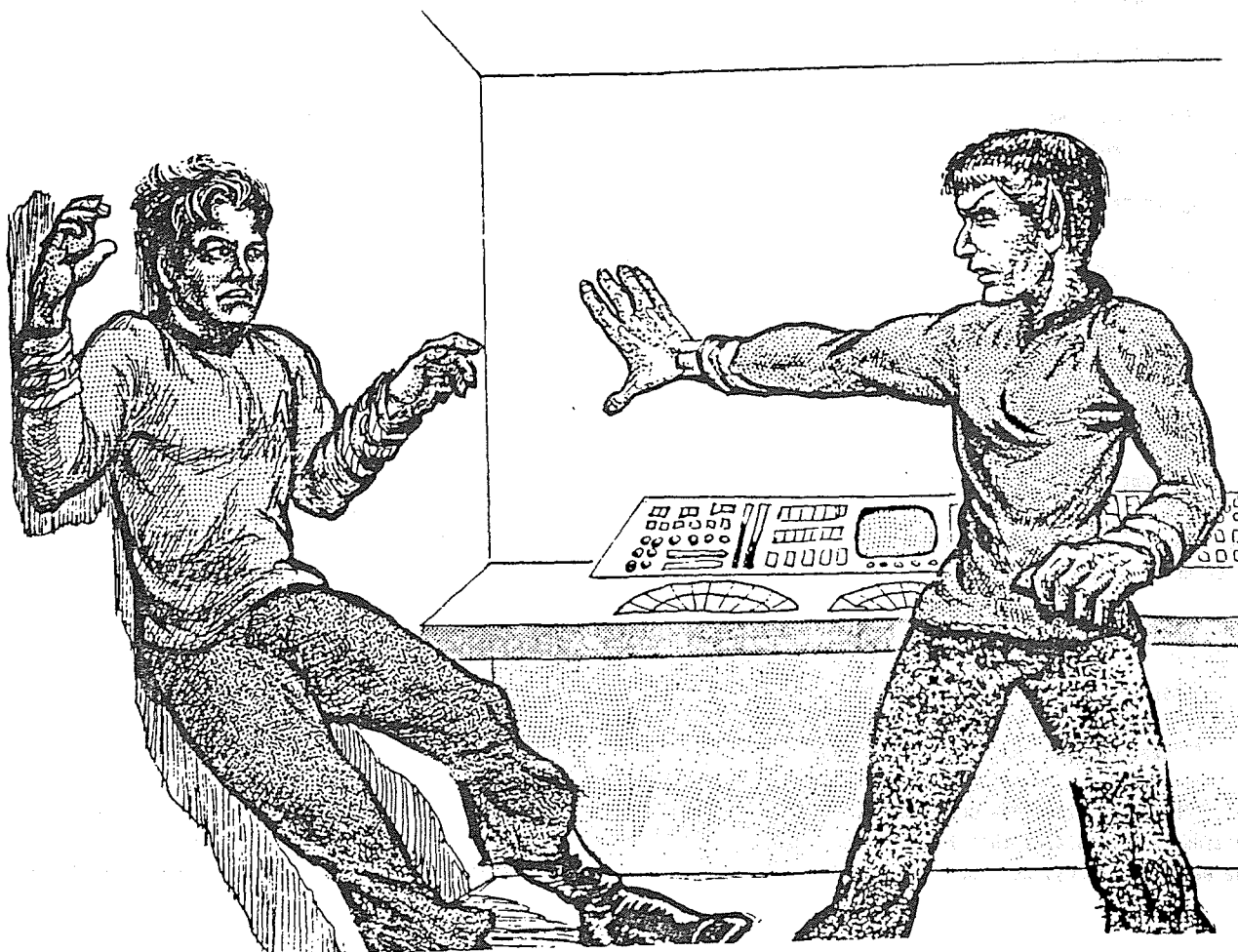
"Other people's customs never bothered you this much."

"Other people have never been so... so..." For once in his life Spock was at a loss for words.

"Spock, just what is it about them that bothers you so much?"

"Quannechota!" No- Fool! Why did I say that?

"...Quanna?" Kirk looked puzzled, concerned, and a little hurt. "I know you two don't get along well, but can't you at least stay out of her way? I haven't noticed her seeking you out."



"There have been times..." Spock couldn't help remembering, vividly, that one particular time in Sickbay. The Rite of Saturn... He trembled. "...unavoidable. She did not warn me..."

"Warn you of what?" Kirk noticed the fine trembling. Worried, he gripped the Vulcan's shoulder.

"Don't touch me!!!" Spock flinched violently away, automatically flinging out his arm. Kirk went flying across the room, stopped only by the wall. Spock froze half-crouched beside the computer console, utterly horrified by what he'd just done.

Kirk managed to catch his breath and pull himself upright. "What the hell?" he said, staring at Spock in undiluted amazement.

"Jim..." ...I think I am going mad. Spock took a step backward, bumped into a chair, gratefully dropped into it and leaned his head in his hands. "Quannechota. She did this to me."

"What? What did she do? How?" Kirk came over and leaned on the console, being careful not to touch the plainly shivering Vulcan. "Explain."

...Evidence for my Court-martial? Very well... "It occurred in Sickbay, just before you... recovered. It was... Quannechota's peculiar ceremony. It... damaged me." --please, please don't ask for details--

"The Rite of- How did you know about that?!" I didn't tell anyone about that! Quanna wouldn't. McCoy?! But how much would he know? Not Jenneth-- even if she knew she wouldn't tell Spock about it... Embarrassment and outraged privacy gave way to bewilderment.

"Jim, don't you remember?" Spock looked up, faint startlement threading through his boundless misery. "I was there."

"You--" I can't believe this! Not Spock, not with his Vulcan reticence. He wouldn't... "You were watching us?!"

"More than watching. You don't know how greatly I wish that I had only been watching..." Spock looked down at his hands, as if wondering what to do with them. "I was in deep telepathic contact with you."

"What?!"

"Jim, I could not leave you! I was holding your mind together! I... She did warn me, but her term was imprecise and I did not... could not shield myself properly. I was compelled to experience... what you felt. I lost myself."

"Oh, my lord..." Kirk stared at him, shaken with the stark memories. No ordinary roll in the hay! Not just sex... like making love to a pagan goddess... Well, that's exactly what it was! Earth goddess, Earth magic, power enough to heal the breach between universes, and he... A Vulcan, dragged through that! "Oh, Spock..."

"My emotional control was severely damaged by the experience." Spock continued dully. "Others have noticed this and called it to my attention. I can no longer trust my own reactions. I am no longer properly objective on... several subjects. I had planned to go to Vulcan for treatment at the end of this assignment. However, since my condition appears to be deteriorating more rapidly than I expected--"

"Spock..." Kirk held out his hand. To his relief, Spock shyly took it. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

Spock was too weary to even attempt a suitable excuse. "I was ashamed."

"I see. So you can't help hating Quanna for it."

"There are other reasons also. By some accident, we are telepathically compatible to a high degree. She intrudes upon my mind, and complains that I intrude upon hers. Then there are the cultural conflicts which she aggravates, the extra work she makes necessary, her habit of distracting me with annoying philosophical arguments... In brief, she makes my task in our

current assignment unnecessarily difficult."

...wait. I've heard one of those complaints before... No, deal with it later. First things first. "All right, Spock. I'll see to it that you don't have to deal with her again. In fact, now that the Galilei's ready to leave, you won't have to deal with any of them again. Oh hell, let's not go back to the party; let them drink themselves under the table without us. Let's go up on the bridge and... well, try to regain our perspective."

"Agreed." Looking infinitely relieved, Spock stood up and meekly followed Kirk out the door.

* * *

...Not back to the party, not yet. Uhura hurried along the corridor, restraining an impulse to run. My quarters. Check those coordinates, orders, copies, directives, interpretations... make sure I have an iron-clad case just in case Spock goes through with-- She skidded to a halt in front of her cabin door, heels digging into the carpet.

Jenneth Roantree sat, knees pulled up, in front of the cabin door. She had been listening to her walkie-talkie, but turned its volume down and hitched it back on her belt as Uhura approached. "I figured you'd come here as soon as Spock had done jabbering at you," she said, climbing to her feet. "I'd like to know more about this Starfleet business."

...with your walkie-talkie open? Uhura thought. Whom do you want to overhear, and why? A trap? Take no chances. I'm in enough trouble already... "Fine," she smiled brightly. "But not here. Let's go up to the Observation Deck." She slid an amiable arm around Roantree's waist, Anarchist-fashion, and unobtrusively depressed the 'off' switch on the walkie-talkie. "No, on second thought, that's likely to be crowded," she said. "Let's go into my cabin."

"Suits me," Roantree shrugged and followed her inside. "First off, how does one go about joining Starfleet?"

* * *

As Kirk stepped out of the turbolift he saw two people on the bridge-- one more than there should have been. DeSalle sat hunched at the con, clearly wishing her were somewhere else. At the computer console sat Quannechota, pushing buttons and studying screens as if she belonged there. Deja vu! Kirk stopped so abruptly that Spock bumped into him. Just like-- Out. get them out of here. DeSalle first: easier... "I'll take over, Mr. DeSalle," Kirk kept his voice cheerful. "Go on down to the party."

DeSalle gratefully got up and left, giving Kirk no message but a desperately apologetic look. Kirk settled in the chair, reviewing all available arguments that would get Quannechota off the bridge, noting how Spock stood close behind him, silent and tense. "Hey, Quanna," he tried, "Don't you want to get back to the party? They're dancing again."

"No, thank you," she smiled at him, ignoring Spock. "I attended long enough for courtesy, and this work is far more valuable."

...maybe, Kirk considered, I should just go ahead and say: 'We want to talk privately.'

It might have worked, but Spock didn't give him the chance. Stung by earlier humiliations, the Vulcan was beyond patience. "Citizen," he intoned tightly, stalking over to the console, "You do not have permission to be on the bridge, and no proper reason for using the bridge computer. Please leave."

"Spock--" Kirk started, then changed his mind. "All right then," he said. "Have it out now. I'll referee. No one else need know."

"Take note, then," Quanna replied, "That I did not start this. Citizen Spock, this work is important: the Galilei does not yet have complete communications, and I need information to improve that state of affairs. Since we depart tomorrow, this is our last chance to obtain communications equipment."

"Round one," Kirk commented, unnoticed.

"Such information as is necessary you could obtain from proper repair personnel at any time."

"I've asked. All they say is that they don't have the equipment. Therefore, we must learn how to manufacture what we need. That is the information I was trying to obtain."

"That is not a pressing need, and in no way justifies your presence here. Kindly depart."

"My presence here needs no justifying; I have worked this console for more than six months, if you'll recall. I needed no 'permission' from you then, and do not see why I should require it now."

"That was an emergency situation, wherein there was no choice. Under normal circumstances, you are not to use this equipment."

"And why not? For half a year I've demonstrated my competency with it."

"Good point," Kirk noted, hoping Spock would be warned against saying anything rash.

Whether he heard or not, Spock changed tactics. "That does not entitle you to continue using property which is not yours, but mine. Now leave my console."

"Yours?" Quannechota arched an eyebrow and stood up. "Indeed? I was informed that this ship is owned by the co-operative, of which you are only one member. I see neither name-plate nor price-tag attached to this console, nor has any one else claimed to own any particular part of the ship. Why this sudden proprietary claim from you?"

"Whether it is labeled or not, that is my console!" Spock insisted.

"I see no evidence to support your claim." Quannechota's eyes narrowed. "On the contrary, I have noticed that you have a habit of extending undue possessiveness to that which is not properly yours."

Spock turned distinctly pale, and his jaw-muscles tightened. He was obviously not accustomed to being called a liar, much less a thief.

"Just a minute," Kirk tried to intervene. --both getting too sore--

"Citizen, I have been patient with your ignorance," Spock hissed, ignoring the referee. "But your groundless accusations exceed the bounds of all courtesy. I have no interest whatsoever in any wretched property of yours, and I will thank you to leave mine alone." The unmistakable tone of menace would have made a Klingon back off.

Quannechota did not retreat one millimeter, but met Spock's stare with one equally unyielding and cold. "I was not speaking only of material property, Citizen," she said, "unless you come from a world where ownership of persons is customary."

Kirk gasped, realizing what a deadly insult that was.

Spock gasped too, and blushed green. He remembered that there was one condition, under Vulcan law, by which one person could own another. "You will not speak to me of such things!" he seethed, forgetting caution.

"And you will not speak of your true motivations, will you?" said Quannechota, her shoulders subtly tensing for combat.

For an instant, Kirk thought they would really leap at each other. Their taut faces were scant inches apart, bordering the space between their profiles to the shape of a symmetrical goblet, features matching perfectly...

--and right there, sharp as a stab of lightning, he realized what he was seeing.

"Oh my god..." he whispered, "Why didn't I see it before?"

In the moment's tense silence, they both heard it. Briefly distracted, they turned to look at him. Their eyebrows raised at exactly the same angle.



"Look at you!" Kirk almost shouted. "Look at each other's faces! Can't you see it? You're looking into a mirror!"

Bewildered, they turned and looked. Slowly understanding came: recognition, realization, astonishment-- and, for Spock, a look of unmitigated horror.

"Spock," Kirk groaned. "I didn't know! I thought she was Miramanee..."

"No..." Spock insisted desperately, taking a fumbling step backward. "No. This is impossible. I was not-- Quannechota, what was your mother's name?"

"Amanda Marie Grayson," she said. "You may as well hear it from me; she was a white-eyes who married into the tribe and took up Chippawa customs. I am a half-breed."

"No!" Spock wrenched himself away from her. "Not... not Sarek's son. Always a half-breed. Amanda's child... in this or any other universe..." He looked as if he were crumbling inside.

Kirk slid out of the chair, automatically reaching to catch Spock in case he collapsed completely.

Quannechota laughed. Quannechota. Laughed. She leaned back against the console, threw her head back, and fairly

howled. Kirk wondered if she were coming apart too, but soon she stopped. "Ha! Oh, Spock," she panted, wiping tears out of her eyes. "You don't know yourself very well, do you?"

Spock said nothing. He fumbled his way to the navigation chair and sat down heavily.

"Spock, listen to me," said Quanna, stepping forward to lean on the rail. "Though we are of the same age, I am still the elder, for my lifespan is more than half gone while yours is less than a fifth past. Life on our world was hard and short, with death always close. You were raised with no such risks, so you kept the illusion that is safe and long. Illusion, Spock! No matter how long, life is always too short! There is never enough of it to waste, as you are doing, in prolonged adolescence."

"What?" murmured Spock, raising his head.

"Adolescence, you overgrown boy! The time when one thinks: 'I have stopped growing, therefore there is nothing more to learn.' Fool! It shines on you, like a halo! Who else would believe in a purity that exists nowhere?"

"Purity?" Spock stared at her, a faint shiver running over him.

"There is no purity," Quannechota smiled coldly. "All reality is made of mixed parts-- the same as you and I. Waste no more of your life denying it, for death may be around any corner. Grow up, Spock. Go ahead and be a man."

Spock said nothing. He only twined his fingers together and studied them as if they were the most fascinating sight in the galaxy.

"Suffer then," Quannechota sighed. "I need not observe it. This bridge is yours, Spock. I will not come here again." She walked off the bridge, to the turbolift, through the opening doors, and did not look back.

"Spock?" Kirk ventured in the intolerable silence. "Did she mean... what I think she meant?" He took a hesitant step forward.

"Yes. I understood." Spock raised his head and looked vaguely into the distance. "How easy it is to be a Vulcan among Humans. Much easier than passing among other Vulcans... I notice that she did not remain among the Chippawa, either."

"You both went to the stars." Kirk stopped where he was, knowing that for the moment Spock desperately needed that distance between them, now that all his armor was gone. Behold, a naked Vulcan! 'Thou shalt not uncover' "...Spock, did you ever think of the advantages? Hybrid vigor. Two points of view. The best of both worlds. You are the best First Officer in the fleet, you know."

Spock gave a sigh that seemed to come all the way from his boots. "But why did they make me so ashamed? One would think Humanity was a hereditary disease!"

"Maybe they didn't know what they were doing to you. Shame is a Human emotion."

"Vulcan also. We are dangerously passionate creatures... Otherwise we would not have needed Surak."

"Then it can't be any more dangerous to be Human. We didn't have a Surak, but we survived."

"Yes... but at the price of always being ashamed of yourselves, always apologetic for the past." He gave a slight, ironic smile. It looked ghastly. "That seems to be the major part of my Human heritage."

"Spock, it doesn't have to be that way!" --please let me help, please let me--

"No. It does not. The Anarchists are marvelously shameless. I suppose that is another reason why the Federation is afraid of them, and wants them safely put away. Should I model myself after them? Could you?"

Kirk thought for a long moment over that one. "There's... so much we could learn from them," he compromised. "Dammit,

we don't have to be all one thing or another! The best of both worlds? Hell, why not a dozen? A thousand?"

"Infinite Diversity in Infinite Combination. A splendid ideal. Unexpectedly difficult to practice." Spock pulled himself to his feet. His gaze drifted to the viewscreen, the image of deep space and its numberless stars. "And with what guide? What standards? ... 'Is thee Vulcan or is thee Human?' I thought I knew, then. Now I am not sure. So easy to believe that all my emotions were Human failings, and all to be suppressed. Now my control is gone, and they all escape. I have no idea what to do."

"Neither do I, Spock. I'm...considerably changed, too." Kirk spread his hands, in offering or plea, and ventured another step. "All I can think of are immediate practicalities. As soon as we settle our guests on their new planet, the five-year mission will be over. We're all due for a long shore leave, time enough to go off somewhere and think. I know a few quiet, peaceful worlds that are very good for that. Spock... Will you come with me?"

Spock turned toward him, eyes unreadable. "I doubt that Quannechota will approve of my presence."

"Oh. Yes. Damn. Damn! Why can't the two of you make peace? Work out some kind of arrangement... It shouldn't be impossible-- especially now that you know what the real trouble is... I mean, I managed to make peace with Jenneth. Can't you do the same with your... twin?"

"Intriguing. Am I your unofficial brother-in-law?" Spock managed another faint smile. This time it didn't look to bad. "I shall have some difficulty explaining this to my parents."

"I can think of worse in-laws," Kirk smiled back. "Hmm, I'm going to have fun explaining all this to my mother, too."

"I can imagine." Spock grew thoughtful again. "Jim, why did you marry Quannechota?"

Taken by surprise, Kirk gulped; "She was pregnant."

Spock's eyebrows shot up, then resettled. "Forgive me. I did not mean to intrude."

"It's all right." After the way I intruded on you-- "You can ask me anything."

Spock nodded briefly, accepting that. "I understand so little of these things... Obviously lack of experience. I wish you could explain to me... Why do you love her?"

"Uhm..." Good question! "I- I thought I had Miramane back."

"I saw Miramane only briefly, but I recall that she resembled Quannechota only in superficialities of skin and hair color."

"True, true..." Kirk gnawed his lip, feeling oddly as if were skirting the edge of an unseen volcano. But I can't hold back from him, not now... "I'm not sure. I didn't love her at first; she was just my, uhm, prescription for terminal loneliness, and I was her stud-horse. Hell of a way to start a relationship."

"There are people," Spock commented quietly, "who consider that normal and proper."

"What?! Who? --Oh." Kirk winced, remembering a certain wedding on Vulcan. "Well, I didn't think it would work. She wasn't what I'd call attractive, or feminine, not like any woman I ever wanted before: body all bones, mind all cold logic--" His teeth clamped on the word.

"You do not find a logical mind attractive?"

"Uhm, well, there was Rayna.. interested in Gravitational Field-Density theories, wasn't it? True..." Kirk took a deep breath and went on. "I'm not sure how or when it changed. Over the days and weeks, living and working with her, I... began

to appreciate her mind: her intelligence, her cool-headed courage, her subtle sense of humor, her tough-minded loyalty..." He trailed off, looking up at Spock. The patient brown eyes waited. "All right, it was your personality. I didn't recognize it because of the cultural differences... and yes, because she was a woman, and I never imagined you... I wasn't thinking to clearly, either. I didn't know why I was drawn to her, but... Oh, damn! All that time I spent trying to find you, and your -- your analogue was right beside me, all the time!"

Spock took a step toward him. "We appear to be... partnered, in every universe wherein we both live to adulthood."

"Yes..." Kirk dropped his gaze to his fingernails. They were shamefully nibbled. "We... seem to make a good team."

"And now there are four of us." Spock's eyes wandered over Kirk's bowed head, noting the tousled bronze hair and shamelessly rounded ears. "The best of both worlds, indeed."

"Or of both universes." Two of each. Male and female. Square-dance... if three, why not four? He glanced at Spock, close enough to touch, hesitant smile beginning.

"Perhaps," the Vulcan murmured. "I should not have reprimanded Uhura..."

"It wouldn't do to break up a good team. Or two." Kirk gently rested a hand on Spock's shoulder.

"Possibilities..." Shyly, Spock returned the gesture.

Just then the turbolift doors whooshed open. Lt. Kyle walked in, saw who was there, and pulled himself to attention. "Lt. Kyle reporting for duty watch, Sir," he announced.

Embarrassed, the other two pulled away from each other. "Uhm, very good, Lieutenant. Carry on." Kirk flicked an apologetic smile back at Spock. "Well, Commander, shall we head back to the party?"

"I should prefer to rest," said Spock, dutifully following the Captain to the turbolift.

They walked off the bridge, rode two floors down with no further words, and went their separate ways as if nothing had happened.

Enough, thought Quannechota, striding efficiently through the corridor. Exactly enough of Spock and his petty obstructions. Enough of catering to his jealousy. We gave him and his their lands and their Science and all their comfortable lives again. Dislike us or no, they can pay the piper...

The Computer Lab door was still locked, but again the touch of her hand opened it. She no longer wondered why. Smiling coldly, she went to the main terminal, sat down, depressed switches and pressed her hand firmly down on the identification plate. Pitching her voice low, she commanded: "Identify."

"Commander Spock, First Officer, USS Enterprise," the computer dutifully replied.

"Remove information locks on all restricted data," said Quannechota. "Transmit directly to Galilei computer."

The computer obeyed.

The transmission took several minutes, which Quannechota found puzzling. ...So much data? Precisely what was he hiding from us? She waited until the transmission was completed, then requested a visual playback.

There was indeed very much data.



It was nearly two hours later that Quannechota managed to pull herself away from the screen. She fumbled over the buttons with numb fingers, turned off the terminal, and sat silent in the dark for several minutes more. Finally, she picked up her walkie-talkie and quietly called Jenneth Roantree.

There was no answer.

Judgment Day

"...So your Alliance is mostly held together by the ships, right?" said Roantree, eyeing Uhura through the smoke from her corncob pipe. "And there are hundreds of small space-lines, but Starfleet is far and away the biggest. Correct?"

"Correct." Uhura sat tensed on the edge of her chair, using every scrap of knowledge she'd ever learned in all her years as Communications specialist, trying to out-guess Roantree. She'd managed to lead the big Co-ordinator's questions in the right direction, so far, but Roantree had a disconcerting habit of jumping off into side-issues, asking for reasons and justifications and background information, coming up with remarkably astute conclusions and dropping them like bombs at odd moments. Giving her answers that were reasonable, consistent, not too far from the truth, and still not dangerously revealing was a complex, and nerve-wracking game.

"With all their exploration work, those ships must do a lot of new data gathering," Roantree continued, "which would also make Starfleet one of the biggest information dealers in the Alliance. Right?"

"Right again." Where is she leading this time? Wouldn't hurt to fill our glasses again... I could use it... and she has the guts of a bear...

"At the very least, that makes Starfleet one hell of a big social influence: big educator, biggest supplier, biggest source of communications between worlds." Roantree lifted her refilled glass, leaned back in her chair, and gave Uhura a toothy smile. "So of course Starfleet's customs have a lot of effect on Alliance worlds. If I knock a hole in Starfleet's idiot ideas about women Co-ordinators, a lot of worlds will change their ideas, too. Right?"

"That's about it." Finally! The most efficient form of persuasion is to give your subject the proper facts so that he will draw your conclusions. True... and sometimes very difficult...

"Uhm..." Roantree looked up at the shadowed ceiling. "So far, we have a new ship and a new world to settle. Of course, I'll have to wait until the settlement's safely established, but still..."

"You could sign the application now and submit it later." Don't sound too eager! "I can help you fill it out, so as to show yourself in the best possible light."

"True." Roantree glanced covertly toward her walkie-talkie, hoping that at least half the crew was listening. "Good ideas to keep all options open. All right, get an application for me -- better still, get applications for all of us. We'll fill out mine right now--" While everyone can overhear how it's done! "--and you hold onto it until I tell you to send it in. Mother knows when that'll be, but there's no harm in starting early."

Uhura suppressed a vast sigh of relief, opened a desk drawer, and pulled out a long, folded sheet of paper. "Sign here at the end," she said. "Then we'll go over the hard part together."

Roantree took the paper, frowned briefly at the crowded fine-print words on the exposed side, accepted Uhura's proffered pen, and signed.

* * *

Quannechota paused at the doorway, studying the scene within. The party was definitely winding down; there were many more unconscious bodies strewn in corners and under tables, and of the celebrants still on their feet, only some of the Anarchists were anywhere near sober. Quannechota studied them carefully, trying to detect the ones least affected.

Unfortunately, there were only three, and two of them were the wrong choice for any sympathy: Ann Bailey and Jean Baitre-le-Diable. Quannechota quietly gritted her teeth.

...If there were some other choice... but there is none. The news is too urgent! Jenneth, Jenneth! The crew must

come first!

Grim and silent, Quannechota slipped into the room and made her way toward Ann Bailey.

* * *

"'Current address'..." Uhura pondered over the application form. "Never mind, I'll get the planet's location from the Captain." 'Omicron Ceti' something, Spock said. Surely not Three, but which others are inhabitable? Check... "World of Origin? What should we call it? 'Alter-Earth'? May as well, I'll explain under 'Location'. Hmm, medical records will be attached separately, so there's no need to go into that. 'Education'..."

"Standard high school and college, but that was on my world," Roantree shrugged. "Not worth much here, I suppose. Deficient in Modern History and Sciences, of course -- except for what I could learn from the Enterprise's computer."

"They'll be able to tell in more detail from the entrance examination," Uhura minimized, wording the answer carefully. "'Work Experience'?"

"You know most of that. The Sunfire, the Enterprise, now the Galilei. Fixing up the old tub may count for quite a bit in the educational department. Heh! Getting in that last batch of armanent took quite a bit of ingenuity..." Roantree smothered a yawn and wondered how late it was getting. "You wouldn't believe how much cutting and trimming and rewiring it took to fit in the Cloak."

"The what?" Uhura gulped. Did she say--? They're not supposed to have a Cloaking Device! "When did that go in? Must've been while I was busy here, or I'd have helped."

Roantree slapped the table in abrupt self-digust. Fool! Let that fact slip... then again, she's given us information the other's wouldn't... "We didn't exactly... spread the news," she murmured, looking Uhura up and down. "Okay. Citizen, we have reason to think that Starfleet has been dangerously stingy with us. The Galilei didn't have half the equipment or weaponry of the Enterprise, and we found out the hard way how much that lowered our survival chances. When we came back this last time, we decided we'd leave here with the same damn equipment the Enterprise has. Well, we've gotten it. Never mind how. We preferred to keep quiet about it on the suspicion that some of these ingrates might try to rip it out again if they knew." There. Truth for truth.

"I... see. Ah, everything the Enterprise has?" Uhura kept her face sympathetic while the hair rose on the back of her neck. "The Cloaking Device and phasers and all that?"

"Everything -- except that the radio parts aren't all put in yet. Hey! We have a few hours left before launching! Could you help us get them installed?"

"Wh-- why, I'd love to!" Uhura thought as fast as she ever had in her life. "In fact, I'll see if I can sneak over there right now and help. Meanwhile..." Her fingers flew over the desk's computer terminal board. "You match this scanner printout of the Galilei's current condition against this ideal one for the Enterprise, and note all discrepancies." Usually done by the computer. Should keep her busy...

"Hah! Nobody told us you could use the scanners with the computer that way," said Roantree, bending enthusiastically over the console. "Hmmm, there's alot they didn't tell us..."

"Besides that," Uhura hurried on, poking more buttons, "here's a display map of the galaxy, showing Alliance territory and the standard trade routes between worlds. You could make good use of that." Damn sure occupied...

"Oh, yes!" Roantree agreed, hesitating between the ship's condition readout and the coveted map, like the proverbial hungry donkey between two bales of hay.

"Fine. Stay here until I get back." Uhura managed not to hurry out the door, took a last look at Roantree, then bolted out and down the corridor. Got to find Christine! she thought frantically. Need her help to check, hide this, until

they're safely away... How long? Exactly where are they going, anyway? 'Omicron Ceti' what? Find out. Nearest computer terminal. Right now.

* * *

Very little remained of the party; many of the guests had left, others were sprawled asleep on the floor, a few were shamelessly making love in poorly-lit corners. No one could have guessed that the foursome crunched behind the sphinx tapestry were engaged in anything serious.

"You're sure?" Hot-Trot repeated almost ritualistically, hammering the unbelievable truth into her mind. "No mistake? You're sure?"

"Tous les horreurs unciennes," Jean whispered, hands clenching and unclenching on his knees. "Des rois, des lois, des cochon-foutrant seigneurs! How was it hidden from us for so long?"



"How indeed?" murmured Bailey, stone-faced and slit-eyed in the cloth-muffled dark. "Where was the Co-ordinator in all this? Where is she now?"

"I greatly wish to know that myself," said Quannechota. "At last report, she was accompanying Uhura to the observation deck. No one is there now, nor does her walkie-talkie respond. It is not impossible that she is being held prisoner somewhere on the ship."

"Is there time to search for her, before we do anything else?" Hot-Trot asked. "Light knows what she may have found out, or what they'd do if they caught her."

"We'll find her," Bailey agreed, "but right now we've got a more pressing problem. We have to tell all the others, without arousing suspicion. We'll take them aside one by one, quietly, get back to our ship, and get her ready to run... or fight. Wire in those last communications channels, if we have to work all night. Then we go after the Co-ordinator."

"Once we get the communications in," Hot-Trot added, "we can tap into the Enterprise's transmissions, and the base's. See just what we're up against."

"If possible," Quannechota considered. "We should take steps to be sure the Enterprise cannot be used to attack us. Nor the base."

"Easy," grunted Bailey. "There's a quick way to sabotage the base's power supply."

"And I can mess up the Enterprise's intraship communications," said Hot-Trot. "There's an exposed spot, just under the bridge."

"Then we must find Jenneth," Quannechota insisted. "She must not be left in their hands."

"Unless she's gone over to them," Jean growled. "She may have known, and been on their side, for a long time."

"That is totally impossible." Quannechota's face couldn't be seen in the dark, but her tone was unmistakable.

"We'll find out," said Bailey. "She still has the walkie-talkie, as far as we know. Tell everyone to leave reception open, but turn off transmission. If she turns hers back on again, well..." Bailey shrugged expressively, unseen. "We'll hear whatever's going on around her. Now let's go."

* * *

Spock sat cross-legged in front of the dully-glowing firepot, repeating for the fiftieth time the mental cues for entering meditation. The customary calm refused to descend. Too much, he realized. Too much disturbing data to integrate all at once. Perhaps it would be better to attempt deep level, sleep briefly, then rise to suitable levels for meditation after the initial tension is dispelled...

The doorbell buzzed.

Modern Vulcan possessed no obscenities; Spock used a choice Andorian word as he slid off the bed and plodded to the door. His state of mind was not at all improved by the discovery that his visitor was Uhura.

"I'm sorry to trouble you at this hour, Mr. Spock," she said, as calmly polite as any Vulcan could wish, stepping into the room. "But there are some things that can't wait for morning. First off, I'd like to apologize for being rude to you earlier this evening."

"Apologies are not necessary." I grow weary of this inefficient and emotional Human form of peace-making...

"But I did, ah, distress you by attempting to recruit Jenneth into Starfleet."

"I am not distressed." ...I am a Vulcan... I am trying to remain Vulcan... which may not be possible... Oh, go away!

"Not...?" Uhura looked him up and down, and changed tactics. "Then I assume my activities will have no harmful effect?"

...How does she make such wild leaps of logic from there to here? "No particular effect in the long run." Why are such 'hunches' often so accurate? Mother does that. Father can never understand it...

"You mean, none of the Anarchists are likely to accept the offer?"

There she goes again! "It is most unlikely." ...after the spores have done their work... Jenneth could be protected, or rescued later, but the others...

"In other words, it won't be any problem because once the spores hit them they'll lose all interest in space travel -- and everything else. Right?"

Spock's eyebrows shot up to his bangs. For a wild instant he wondered if Uhura had suddenly sprouted telepathic talent. "What do you mean?" he stalled.

"You know very well what I mean. Your face just gave you away... Vulcan." Uhura smiled coldly. "I checked the computer about the Omicron Ceti system. The Bertholdt rays made every last planet uninhabitable -- except for Number Three, where those lotus-eater flowers are. That's where you mean to dump the Anarchists, isn't it?"

"What... what makes you think..."

"You yourself mentioned the Omicron Ceti system. The other planets are uninhabitable. If Starfleet simply meant to kill the Anarchists, it would have done it much quicker and cheaper than by playing this charade with the Galilei and the starbase. Therefore, Starfleet means to send the Anarchists to Omicron Ceti Three. Logical?"

"Logical..."

"What a lovely solution to the Anarchist problem! They'll be healthy and happy and safely out of the way, and any dangerous ideas they have will stay there with them. And you approve!"

"My approval or lack of it has no effect upon my orders, nor my obedience thereto." IamaVulcan!

"I see. Good night." With that, Uhura turned on her heel and went straight out the door.

Spock stared at the closed doors for a few moments, trying to get his whirling mind under control. Then it occurred to him that Uhura had already steered dangerously close to insubordination in her attempts to use the Anarchists for her own Cause. Nobody had managed to directly order her to desist. She might even warn them! Stop her! Jim...

He turned around and went straight to the intercom.

It was dead.

Would she go as far as deliberate sabotage? This was no time to take chances. Spock turned off the useless intercom and strode out into the corridor. Uhura was nowhere in sight. Badly worried, Spock went to the Captain's quarters.

* * *

"...Comparable," Roantree murmured aloud, going over the last details of the readout. Except for linking up those last communications channels, the Galilei was very nearly as fit as the Enterprise. Not quite as strong, not quite as fast, quite a bit older and wearier, but good enough... for colonizing, defense, trade...

She pushed the diagram aside and picked up the starmap. She'd always loved maps, especially those fragile treasures that survived from the old times, the ones that showed bold highways and the names of vanished cities where later charts had showed wildernesses, no-man's-lands, warning of Here There Be Monsters... 'Here There Be Dragons,' she smiled, fingers tracing over the lines of stars. And giants, and elves, and the gods know what else...

Her face stretched in a cavernous yawn. She remembered that it was growing late, and the next day was Departure, and she'd have to be wide awake for that. Yes, soon, she promised herself. Soon as Uhura comes back. Leave, hit the sack, sleep, dreams of stars.

The map looked blurry. She leaned closer, resting her head on her arm. Stars... She yawned again. How shall I have them? Ask the crew if they want to join altogether, with the ship... They probably won't. Now with a whole world to settle. Wait until the colony is safely settled, then. Join by myself... provided there's another Co-ordinator trained by then... Quanna won't be coming. Join by myself. Why not? No family now... no home, but a ship... nothing really to hold me to any world...

Slowly, her eyes drifted closed.

* * *

The last casualties had been shoveled out, Dr. McCoy had taken the opportunity to catch a private invitation spin-off of the party, and Sickbay was finally empty. Christine Chapel pulled off her boots, leaned back in her chair, and basked in the quiet. She didn't really want to attend any of the departure-eve bash; sad farewells always depressed her, and to judge from the mood of the Anarchists for the last few days, this particular party would have an undertone of sorrow and anger rather than cheerful celebration. Besides, she had a lot to think about. Jenneth in Uhura's scheme, for example, Christine considered, scratching one foot. Her skill, our need... but it still doesn't fit. She wouldn't fit. 'Discipline of the Service'? Her? Never... 'Shoe the colt, shoe the colt, shoe the wild mare. Here a nail, there a nail, yet she goes bare'...

"Chris! Thanks be, you're here!" Uhura scurried up to the desk, glancing over her shoulder.

Speak of the devil... But what is she afraid of? "Something the matter, 'Penda?"

"There is. Are we alone?"

"Absolutely. What's up?"

Uhura dropped into the nearest chair, jabbing her fingers distractedly through her collapsing hairdo. "I found out what Starfleet has in mind for our friends," she said, voice low and fast. "They're to be sent to Omicron Ceti Three."

"Omicron--" Christine paled. "My lord, no!"

"Oh, yes. Perfect solution, isn't it?"

"Starfleet... No, they can't do this! Just throwing them away, after all they've done, all they could do..." Christine ground her fist into her forehead. "I honestly didn't think Starfleet could sink to something like this."

"It can. It has." Uhura glared around the room. "I can think of only one way to stop it."

"How?"

"Get them to follow Roantree. I've already persuaded her to join Starfleet; she signed the application form just an hour ago, in my cabin."

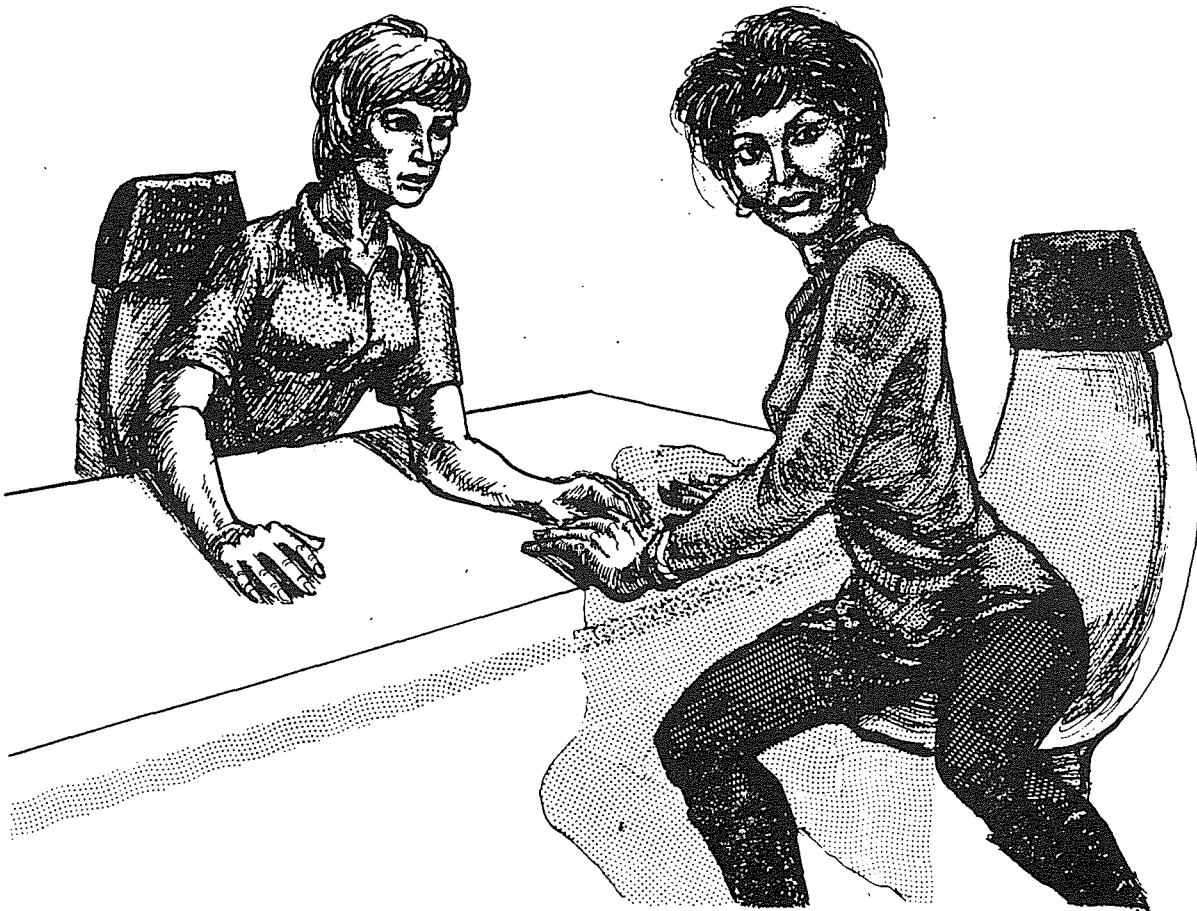
"She did? Does she realize--"

"Not everything. I told her about the anti-woman bias, how she could fight it, and she was interested. She told me to hold the papers until she gives the word, but she did sign up."

"What about the others?"

"They're interested. I think they would join en masse, with the ship, if they can be persuaded away from settling." Uhura exhaled through her teeth. "We've got to warn them about that planet, tell them the truth, but make it look as if Starfleet didn't know the danger."

"Why not?" Christine asked, an oddly distant note in her voice.



"Oh, don't be a fool, Christine! If they know Starfleet planned this, they'll never forgive it! Join? Hell, they'll probably take off into unknown territory as fast as they can fly -- or maybe worse! Wake up, girl! This is our last chance to aim them at Starfleet, and we have to do it right."

"Right," Christine echoed, eyes unreadable. "I suppose, the sooner we start, the better. Where are the Anarchists now?"

"Probably at the party, except for Roantree. I left her in my cabin, playing with maps and status diagrams. She's waiting for me, so I have to get back there soon. You'll have to go up to the party and deal with the others. When does

your relief come in?"

"Another hour, but I can call up--"

Just then the door opened. Uhura jumped in her chair and turned to see who was coming in. She paled noticeably to recognize the intruder for a Security man.

"Lt. Uhura," he said, "you're wanted on the bridge. There's been an intercom failure."

Christine and Uhura exchanged looks.

"Right now, ma'am," the Security man insisted. "Mr. Spock's orders."

"Uhm, yes," said Uhura fixing a polite look on her face and thinking fast. "Chris, while I'm gone, will you drop in my cabin and, ah, leave a note to my friend explaining where I've gone?"

"Certainly," Christine replied with a smile that was just as mild, polite and insincere. She didn't let it fade until Uhura had left. Then she pulled on her boots and stood up. "Yes," she murmured to herself. "I'll take a message to Roantree..." She whistled softly through her teeth as she headed out into the corridor, but didn't add the words until she was safely alone in the turbolift. "...Here a nail, There a nail, Yet she goes bare."

* * *

Real trouble, Uhura realized, the moment she stepped onto the bridge. The Captain was there, and Spock, and Scott. The burly engineer was running back and forth between consoles, checking ship's status readings, and Spock was under the communications console with his head and hands buried in wiring. He pulled out as she hurried up, fixing her with an inscrutable look. "What do you know about this, Lieutenant?" he asked accusingly.

"Absolutely nothing, Mister Spock!" she snapped back at him, settling into the console chair. "Indeed, I'd appreciate it if you'd explain this to me."

"I first noticed the intercom failure shortly after you left my quarters, whereupon I personally informed the Captain and accompanied him here. So far we have found no damage or misalignment within the main console, but the failure of intership communications is total. We are presently attempting to pinpoint the site of the breakdown, its nature and... cause." He gave her an unblinking stare. So did Kirk.

"I see." She glanced coolly from one to the other. "So you first noticed the problem about fifteen minutes ago?"

"16.8 minutes, to be exact."

"Indeed? No more than forty minutes ago, I obtained a ship's-status readout from the computer. There was no communications breakdown noted on it. That should give you some idea of when the damage occurred."

"Uhura..." Kirk's voice was as level and weary as his look. For the first time since they'd returned, he reminded her painfully of the one-eyed Silver King he'd been in that other universe. "Where were you during that time?"

"First, I spent about fifteen minutes at the general-access library computer terminal on Deck #4. Then I went to talk with Mr. Spock for perhaps ten minutes. Finally I dropped in at Sickbay -- where your 'messenger' found me."

Spock and the Captain looked at each other. Uhura could practically see Kirk saying 15 minutes isn't enough time, and Spock replying She might not be telling the truth about the printout.

"When was the last time anyone successfully used the intercom?" she asked, trying to sound innocent.

"There is no way to determine that," Spock replied, "Although Mr. Kyle confirms that he used it shortly before coming on duty, 72.8 minutes ago."

"Well, that gives us some parameters." she said, turning back to her console. "Mr. Scott, please check secondary branch-lines #1-14."

"Just a minute," Kirk stopped her. "Uhura, why did you use the general access terminal for the floor, instead of the one in your cabin?"

Oh-oh. No way around it... "I couldn't use the one in my cabin because a... guest was using it."

"What guest?" Kirk didn't take his eyes off her.

If only I dared to say 'Sulu'! "Jenneth Roantree, sir."

Kirk blinked. Spock turned around to stare at her. "Was it for her," he asked, "That you made a printout of the ship's status?"

"Yessir." Djamballa! They'll think she did it! "I also gave her a similar printout of the Galilei, for comparison." Her or me?!

Another exchange of looks between Kirk and Spock.

"She could not help noticing the difference in communications systems," Spock commented.

"True." Kirk rubbed his forehead. "She and her friends just may have gotten into our system and cannibalized it for parts!"

"Unlikely, sir," Scott cut in. "They wouldna have to. They a'ready --" He suddenly shut up like a clam. Too late. All eyes turned on him.

So that's how they got-- Uhura quickly turned back to her board, hoping nobody had caught her reaction.

"Scotty," said Kirk, getting up. "Come with me please."

Scott wordlessly followed him into the turbolift. The doors shut behind them.

"All right, Scotty," Kirk sighed, leaning against the wall. "Let's have it. Why did you say the Anarchists wouldn't have to cannibalize our ship for communications parts?"

"Because they a'ready have 'em." Scott didn't look at him. "'Tisna completely connected yer, but 'tis a' there."

"Did you give it to them?"

"Aye... But I didna take it from the Enterprise!"

"You ordered it from the base? And then handed it over to them?"

"Aye."

"Scotty, I ought to punch you right through these doors! Don't you realize that Starfleet Command will want your hide for this?!"

"They'll want me more than that if they learn a' the truth." Scott pulled his eyes up to meet Kirk's. "'Tisna unlikely they'll want me hanged."

"What?!" Kirk grabbed him by the shoulders. "Scotty, what did you do???"

"I gave tha Anarchists phasers for the Galilei, an' photon torpedoes, an' now shields, an' a Cloakin' Device."

"Scotty!" Torn between wanting to throw his arms around Scotty and wanting to strangle him, Kirk compromised by shaking the Engineer until his teeth rattled. "Why? Why did you do it?"

"Agh, oof," Scott gasped as Kirk let him go. "'Tis hard ta explain. I... had an obligation."

"An obligation! Enough to override direct orders from Starfleet?"

"Aye, Sir." Scott tugged his shirt back into place and quietly resumed his unshakable basic dignity. "Duty is supposed to ootweigh personal considerations, I know, an' weel I know. But it canna absolve ye o' tha need for personal judgment -- or more-than-personal debts."

Kirk didn't say anything. He had an idea where this was leading, and he'd been there before.

Scott mistook his silence for disapproval. "Dommit, Jim! Ye know whot we owe them! Is it fair return ta send 'em into space wi' no shields nor weapons nor even eyes an' ears ta see danger comin'? But for Roantree's cleverness, Strickler's wee Courier could ha' blown 'em ta hell -- an' ye know there's much worse oot there. I couldna send 'em off like babes in the wood!"

"We'll be accompanying them..." Kirk let that trail off, remembering that after he'd taken them to their real new home the Anarchists and their ship would be entirely on their own.

"'Tisna sufficient, an' ye know it. We'll guard 'em only so long, an' afterwards, whot? They know sa little o' tha truth; they must go blind an' helpless as weel?"

"Starfleet wants it that way." Kirk was surprised -- no, not truly surprised -- at the bitterness in his own voice.

"Then Starfleet be damned! Where was Starfleet, in its bluidy might an' wisdom, when we were clawin' oor way back across time? Starfleet wasna there, an' didna see, an' willna believe tha worth o' whot Jenneth's people ha' done! Begod, Starfleet's naethin' sa holy thot 'tis a'-knowin', much less a'-wise! Admirals too can be fools an' ingrates!"

"I know..."

"Weel, I remember oor debts -- ma own in particular -- an' I'll repay as best I can. Wha' else can I do when I see the almighty Command doin' wrong? And it is wrong! Dommit, I do have some judgment o' ma own, an' I'm bluidy well obligated ta use it!"

Precedents, Kirk considered. Andersonville. Nuremberg. The Order of Maria Theresa...

"Jim, we were there!" Scott almost pleaded. "We saw tha proof wi' oor own eyes! Right there on tha line, where the work is done: that's where tha knowledge is, an' tha choices must be made. There, begod, if ye're forced ta choose between 'em, 'tis better ta trust in whot yer own eyes see an' yer own mind knows -- better than in laws an' orders made far away an' unseein'. Ye're more likely ta survive that way, as well ye know!"

"Yes. I could see it with one eye and half a brain." Kirk squeezed Scott's shoulders once and then let his hands drop. "No word of this to anyone, for as long as we can hide it. If anyone learns what equipment the Galilei has, you don't know anything about it. Understand?"

Scott only nodded, looking at him, almost afraid to believe.

"It's very simple, Scotty," Kirk explained, his odd smile exactly like the one he'd sometimes worn in Jenneth's universe. "I have memories, too, and I understand you better than you guess. I'll keep your secrets, Scotty. And--" pinning the Engineer with an eerie, knowing look, "--you keep mine."

Scott's eyebrows climbed and his mouth shaped a soundless whistle, but all he said was, "Aye, Sir."

"Fine." Kirk opened the turbolift door and led the way back to their places on the bridge.

* * *

Nobody answered the light tap on the door. Christine tried tapping louder. Finally she rang the buzzer. Still no answer.

Dammit, she couldn't have left! It's locked from the inside. Or could Uhura have, on the way out...? Then she went up to the bridge -- can't go get her! Only Roantree, inside, can... Dammit, answer! This is taking too long, making too much noise...

Still afraid to shout Jenneth's name, Christine closed her hands into fists and began pounding on the door.

* * *

Uhura looked up hopefully as Scott and the Captain re-entered. "Sir, I think I've pinpointed the trouble," she offered brightly. "The main intercom line is completely severed, just where it branches off from the central conduit in the between-docks crawl-space. It can be reached via service tube 4-6, and we can probably repair it in a few minutes."

"There is no possibility that the damage is accidental," Spock added coldly.

Uhura glared daggers at him.

"When I find the prankster who did it, I'll have his hide," Kirk promised. "Meanwhile, get busy on the repairs."

"Yessir," Uhura complied, going to the service tube entrance. She covertly studied Scott as she passed him, but his expression revealed nothing.

"Captain," Spock noted, "my sensors show some unusual activity on the Galilei. Her engines are idling at high power." He switched the screen to a view of the big transport. Sure enough, the tell-tale glow sullenly lit the domed heads of her nacelles.

"Ham, I guess our friends want to make a last check before retiring for the night." Kirk's voice was nonchalant, but an ominous feeling itched between his shoulder blades. He leaned back in the chair, deliberately relaxing his body, and stretched his mind toward Jenneth Roantree's. What are you up to, he wondered, searching. What kind of nasty surprise are you planning to spring on me?

There was no reply but a heavy feeling of sleep.

...Not up to anything. Relieved, Kirk withdrew from her. And her crew wouldn't do anything important without her knowledge. No real problem, then... Probably just Bailey checking the engines. "Can you tell how Uhura's managing?" he asked Scott, turning his attention back to the repairs.

Just then a light flashed on Uhura's console. Kirk got up and went to see what it meant, and noted that it was the closed channel from Starbase 12. Wondering what could be going on over there at this hour, Kirk answered the call.

"Jim, is that you?" It was Mendez's voice, sounding tense and wide awake. "Are you alone up there?"

"There's no one within hearing. What's the matter?"

"The Admiral, that's what. Besides telling me to scan the Galilei every hour, he told the Pershing to scan likewise as soon as she came into range."

"What?" You've been scanning her and haven't seen... or haven't reported the additions... "So he sent Strickler to spy on you?"

"The proper term is 'support surveillance'. Technically, the Pershing's main assignment was to bring in some new base personnel; she was supposed to wait outside the Galilei's limited sensor range until after our problem child left, and while away the hours doing a bit of checking up."

"I... take it Strickler found something he didn't like."

"Damn right, Jim. It seems that our friends somehow jury-rigged some long-range scanners for the old crate. Strickler apparently saw them using the same a little while ago -- my guess is that he barely avoided being seen himself, and was pissed over it -- and the little bastard dutifully told the Admiral's office. Before telling me, I might add."

"Christ on a crutch!" Kirk fumed. "In just a few more hours the Galilei would have left, and then it wouldn't have mattered. Damn, it still shouldn't make any difference! Where they're going, even regular long-range scans won't show them anything they shouldn't see. Can you explain that to Komack?"

"I sent off a report to that effect, but I don't think it'll do much good. Jim, the old bastard's been looking for any excuse to jump on both of us, and this may be just what he wants. I don't know how long it'll take him to get the message; this is the middle of standard-time night. With any luck he won't hear about it until he gets to his office tomorrow, which should be around 0800."

"Hmmm, just about the time the Galilei is due to leave..."

"If I were you, Jim, I'd do everything possible to speed up that departure time."

"I'll see what I can do. Thanks."

"Vaya con Dios." The transmission ended.

Kirk leaned back in his chair and swore. "Spock," he finished, "go help Uhura with those repairs. We've got to round up Jenneth's people and get them out of here. Fast."

* * *

"Jenneth!" Amid the vague pounding came a word. "Jenneth, let me in!"

"...Mmm... coming..." Roantree yawned, pulled an eye half open and dragged herself up from the desk. She stumbled to the door and opened it, still not completely awake. "Wha's up?"

As the door opened, Christine Chapel darted through. She flattened herself against the nearest bulkhead and waited, panting, until the door slid shut again. "High time! I must've been pounding on that door for ten minutes! Were you asleep?"

"Uhuh. Whassamatter?" Roantree stifled a huge yawn.

"Jenneth, you've been tricked. Go out, gather your crew, beam over to your ship, and get out of here. For godsake, don't go to that planet they're giving you -- it's a trap! Take your ship and your people and run away! Get clean out of Federation space! Go to the Rim, or the Center, or some other place where no empire reaches, but go now! Go fast! Don't wait for tomorrow morning!"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute..." Roantree blinked, trying to comprehend all that. "Who's tricked us? What's the 'Federation'? What kind of trap are you talking about?"

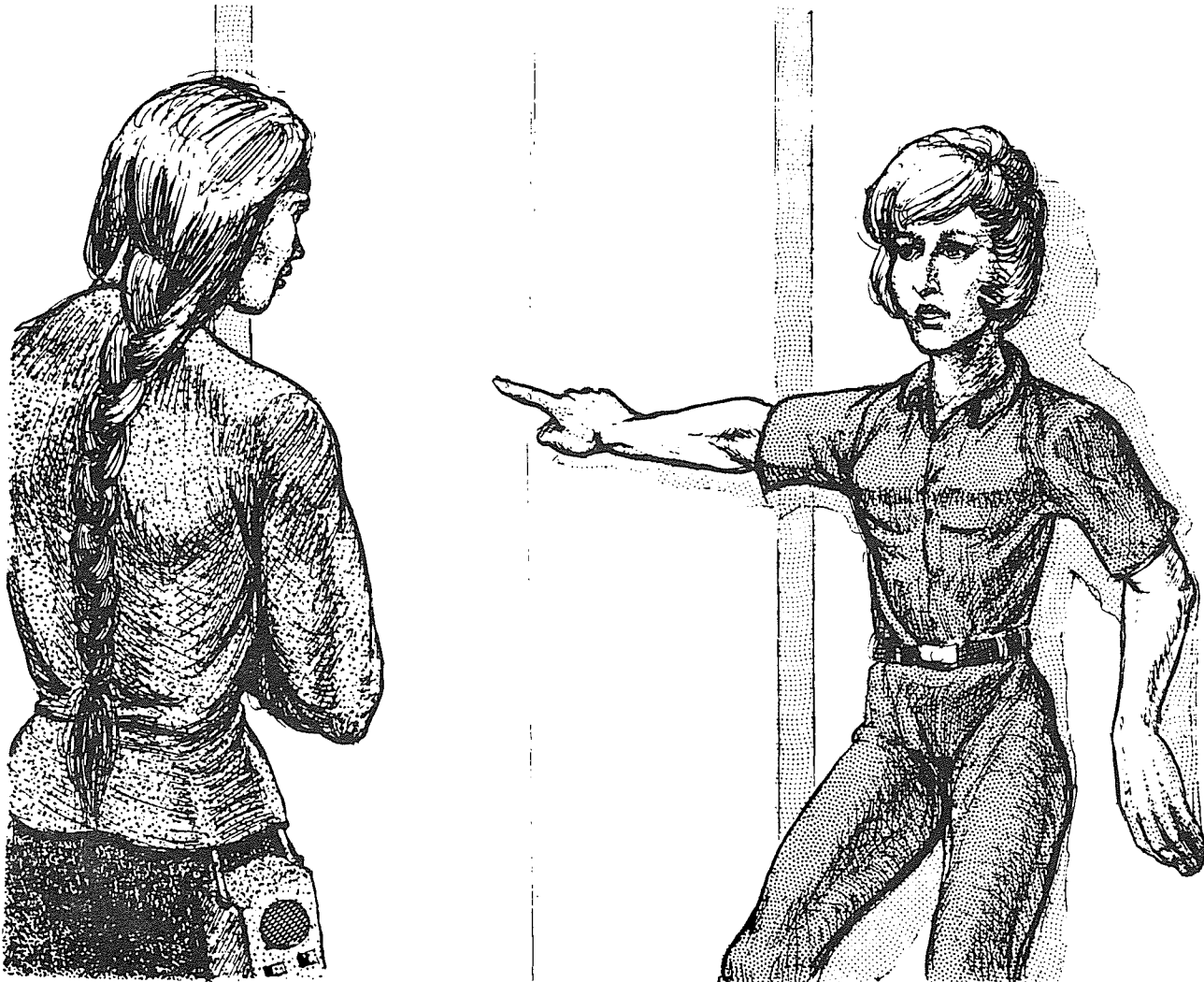
"There's no time to explain everything! The real name of the 'Alliance' is the United Federation of Planets. They

don't want you and your people running around loose, and they're planning to send you to a world you'll never get off again!"

"What?"

Right then the intercom beeped.

"Oh! The intercom's working again! That means--" Christine did some fast guessing. "Don't answer that! I have to get out of here fast, and so do you. Run for it, Jenneth!" With that, she turned and bolted out the door.



The intercom stopped buzzing.

"Mother of Mares!" Roantree grabbed the star map, stuffed it into her nearest pocket, picked up the walkie-talkie -- and then saw that it was turned off. How long? What have I missed? She punched it back on and listened to hear who was awake and talking.

There was no voice anywhere on the network, only the soft hum that told that other units were open to receive.

"Roantree calling. Roantree calling. Emergency! Is anyone there?"

No answer.

* * *

"It's repaired, Sir." Uhura came out of the access door considerably mussed from crawling around in the service tube. She hoped that would explain any signs of worry that might slip past her control. Those lines were cut, with a single clean stroke! She remembered the sight vividly as she settled to her console. No accident! Jenneth's people. One of us would have thought to use a phaser... Why? Something I told them? "Testing now, Sir." She called her own quarters, heard the buzzer sound several times, and no reply. "It's operating, Sir." And Roantree's gone!

"Call down to the party and see who's there."

"Yessir." Uhura complied, wondering if anyone at that howling orgy would hear the intercom, much less deign to answer it. Nobody did. "I'm getting no answer, Sir."

"Well, there's obviously someone on the Galilei. Try a call over there." If they've already started over, this will be much easier.

"Sir, I'm getting no answer."

"What?" --the hell? Something's wrong.

"Sir, I am getting an incoming signal, but it's the Starfleet priority channel."

Oh-oh... "Who is it?"

"Sir, it's Admiral Komack. He sounds... upset."

"Damn." ...too late, Jenneth. Time's run out. God knows what I can salvage now! "Go ahead and put him on."

* * *

"Answer!" Roantree almost shouted into the walkie-talkie. "Where is everybody? Lord of Light, are you all dead?"

Still no reply.

Roantree took a deep breath. "All right. If anyone can hear me, I'm in Uhura's cabin, but I won't be for long. I just heard a warning that we've been tricked; the Alliance isn't what we've been told, and its people are out to destroy us if they can. I was warned to get off the Enterprise and the Starbase, and I'm inclined to agree. Whoever can hear me, get our crew to the Galilei and prepare to run for it. I'm going to find Jim and check this story out. If it's as bad as it seems -- and if I can't get out quickly -- don't wait for me. Run like hell."

She dropped the walkie-talkie back on her belt, checked once more to be absolutely certain that reception was on and wide open, and stalked out the door.

* * *

"This is the first I've heard of it, Sir," Kirk lied glibly, drawing thoughtful looks from his bridge crew. "But I don't see that it presents any real problem. Where we're taking them, Jenneth's people won't see anything suspicious even with the improved sens--"

"There's no guarantee of that!" Admiral Komack thundered from the viewscreen. "This is directly contrary to orders! A breach of security! Intolerable!"

"Orders on that point were confusing and contradictory, Sir," Kirk parried, hitching one shoulder higher than the other. "Jenneth's people were invited to help themselves to supplies, and they did just that. Nobody expected that they could use authorized equipment to rig up--"

"That's beside the point! The fact is, those savages now have forbidden equipment, and they're not going to get away with it!" Komack's righteous glower took on a trace of gloating delight. "Starfleet has bent over backwards to coddle those friends of yours, Kirk, but not any more! This is the end of your kid-glove treatment! You send your engineers over to the Galilei, rip out those long-range scanners, and never you goddam mind if their tender little feelings get hurt!"

Kirk, gritting his teeth, didn't hear the turbolift doors open. "With all due respect, Admiral, that would be an unwise move. Jenneth's people aren't the sort to put up with insults and bullying and the looting of their ship -- which is exactly how they'd see it. They won't just complain; they'll fight. They can be quite formidable opponents, as Captain Strickler can tell you."

Uhura noticed the shadow sliding across her console, looked up, recognized the newcomer, and froze. She didn't dare say anything that might be overheard by the Admiral, but she reached to Spock's station and quietly tapped his shoulder.

"Are you trying to tell me that your whole Security staff can't handle 41 scruffy primitives?" Komack bellowed. "Borrow some from Mendez! Give them phasers and send them around the ship with orders to shoot on sight! Stun the whole pack of savages and let them wake up in detention cells, if you're that scared of them!"

Spock turned around, paled, and started to stand up. A cold green stare stopped him in mid-motion.

"And then just how would we take them and their ship to their new home, Admiral?" Kirk struggled to keep the rage out of his voice. "I sincerely doubt that they'll follow us willingly if we start knocking them around."

"Oh aa lord..." muttered Scott. He was not remarking on Kirk's comment, but upon a presence he'd just noticed.

"So lock them up on the Galilei and let them make the trip in the brig!" Komack retorted. "Or stow them in the trailer! Or rip out the Galilei's engines and tow her! Who cares? There's no goddam reason to keep nursemaiding those creeps any more! We've done far too much of that already!"

Kirk could feel his face turning brick-red. No! Don't lose your temper now! Think! His fingers dug into the chair-arms until the plastic creaked. "For your information, Admiral, those 'creeps' saved our whole damned universe for us. But for them, this would be a Romulan-ruled galaxy -- and you, Sir, would have been a mud-grubbing serf on some Romulan lord's private estate, if you'd been born at all. Jenneth's people saved you and all the rest of us from that, and they deserve a hell of a lot better for it than this!"

"So I suppose you want us all to kiss their muddy butts?" snarled Komack. "Maybe you want to give a seat on the Federation Council to ever photon torpedo that every zapped a Klingon! That's about the same!"

"These aren't tools -- they're people!"

"They're a small gang of savages who once had the good luck to be useful to the Federation! They're getting a whole world for a reward, and that's more than they deserve! The ship is just gravy, and they've misused it, so you go over there and rip out those unauthorized sensors, and never mind if those brutes squall about it! That's an order, Kirk!"

"That's a what?" said a familiar voice behind the chair.

Kirk froze. He knew who it was.

"Who's that?" snapped Komack, noticing the new image on his screen.

"I'm Jenneth Roantree, Co-ordinator of the Sunfire, of Camp Clavius, and now of the Galilei. Who are you?"

"I am Admiral Komack!"

"'Admire-all'? Bull. There's nothing admirable about bigmouth bullies who insult people from a safe distance. But if you really want to play that game, I can play it, too."



"This is a private conversation! Butt out!"

"There's nothing private about the way you're bellowing, and since this bull-session involves my people, it damn-well concerns me, too."

"Get off that bridge!"

"Try and push me."

"That's an order!"

"So what?"

"You -- you--" Komack turned purple. He'd obviously never faced outright defiance before. "Kirk, I order you to--"

"Don't try." Roantree darted her hands under Kirk's chin and pulled sharply backward. "If anyone moves, I'll break his neck."

Nobody moved.

"You can't get away with this!" Komack screeched. "I'll have the whole Starbase staff come get you! I'll--"

"Let 'em come. Most of 'em are dead drunk, and the rest we can handle. There are 41 of us, all armed, and we can take out at least one apiece. How many can you afford to lose?"

Komack flapped his mouth a few times before managing to say anything. "You won't get away with this!" was the best he could come up with. "I'll send half of Starfleet out after you! You'll never get off the base!"

"Then we'll blow it up," Roantree shrugged. "It isn't hard; I've seen the place. Just a well-placed bomb in the main power supply, or one good zap with a photon torpedo, or a little wire-cutting in life support will do just as well."

"B-but you'll all die!" Komack flailed.

"You've just threatened to enslave us. I heard it. Do you think we'd consider death any worse? I wonder what manner of folk you're used to dealing with, that you'd think we'd scare so easy."

"You -- you--" Komack floundered. "You fools! You don't know what you're up against!"

"Oh yes we do," said Roantree, an oddly sad look on her face. "It all comes down to the same old threat, voiced by every arrogant swine who ever thought he was the biggest bully in town: do what you say, or you'll rob, torture, and kill us. Well, we have nothing left to steal, and we won't stand still to be tortured, and we're not afraid of dying if that's the only way to be free. So what can you do to us to make us obey? Nothing. Not now, and no other time."

"I can do anything to you! I am Admiral Komack!"

"I can think of more fitting names."

"Look, you miserable--"

"I am looking. You look like a bloated and inflamed asshole on the southern end of a north-bound baboon. I take no shit from you."

Komack gasped, wheezed, looked as if he were suffering from apoplexy, and abruptly shut off the transmission. The viewscreen filled with a display of tranquil stars.

Ignoring the hands on his neck, Kirk laughed. He leaned back in the chair and brayed with laughter until tears ran down his cheeks. Roantree let go, stepped back and watched him, and kept a thoughtful eye on the others. Nobody else moved.

Eventually the whooping and yukking died down to something controllable. "Ho! Ho! I -- Hee! Oh, Jenny, I've wanted to say that to him for years! Haw! Did you see his face? Purple! Ahm gorgeous..."

"Umhm. Admiral Komack. Right." Roantree took a few steps toward the screen, nodding slowly. "Admiral this, Captain that, and Starfleet the other. Why the hell didn't I see it before?"

Silence settled over the bridge. Kirk took a deep breath and let it out slowly. Now that the long-awaited moment had come, he felt curiously calm, detached, almost relieved. "Not here, Jenneth. Let's go off the bridge and discuss it in private."

"No," said Roantree, the green tinge glittering in her eyes. "This is a good enough place. Do you think I'd trust you now to guide me through a door?"

"Privately, Jen." Kirk gestured briefly at the other three officers on the bridge.

"Why? What are you ashamed of? My whole crew can see me naked if they ask!"

"All right." Witnesses for my court-martial, no doubt. Kirk settled back in his chair. "Go ahead. Say it."

"Starfleet is a... Navy, Jim?" Her face was completely expressionless; through the mental link came nothing but a vast sense of cold. "Your Alliance is really a -- a government. A state. The ancient tyranny revived, and spread out over the stars."

"Not like that, Jen. It's no tyranny. It's--"

"'Security staff', 'detention cells'," Roantree quoted at him. "The way you automatically flinch at the word 'order'. They come to the same thing; it's only a question of degree. You let other people rule you, use you, make a tool of you -- sneaking your own will past them as if it were a dirty secret, crawling for capering apes like that Komack there. You don't call it tyranny? Why not? Isn't it obvious enough for you? Didn't you know what kind of life you were living here?"

For the moment, Kirk didn't answer. He couldn't find the right words to deny what she was saying. ...'only a question of degree'... Life's little annoyances! Accepted, like bad weather... because it never occurred to me that the world could run without them. But it can! It's possible! Where the hell does that leave me?

"I must protest, Citizen," Spock cut in, rising smoothly out of his chair. For an instant he wondered whether he could dart across the intervening space and nerve-pinch Jenneth's shoulder before she could jab foot or fist into his solar plexus. Then he noted the daggers in her boot and sleeve, and decided against physical confrontation. "The Federation is a remarkably tenuous organization, more of a mutual agreement of trade and protection between thousands of inhabited planets. The foremost of these agreements, which we call the Prime Directive, forbids interference in the society of any world. This would apply to your people as well."

"Would it, now?" Roantree gave him a brief, ghastly smile. "So the land would be ours, and only the sky above us ruled by your pious masters, eh? And what kind of world would slave-keepers give to incorrigible freedom-freaks like us?"

Spock paled. "It is... a mild and temperate planet..." he tried.

"Nurse Chapel told me it was a trap. We'd never get off it. You plainly know that there's something wrong with that world, Spock; try as you will, your face gives you away."

Spock gulped, said nothing, sat down. Uhura, fingers poised above the silent alarm button, paled under her tan. Christine told her!? Chris!

"Yes, that world is a trap," Kirk admitted, holding out his empty hands, "but I wasn't going to lead you there."

The other three senior officers turned to stare at him. Uhura pulled her hand away from the alarm button.

"I was planning to fake the orders, change a number in the coordinates, take you to a safe world out beyond the edge of Federation territory. You would have been isolated, but free." There. Before witnesses. 'Intent to mutiny'. Hang me for it!

"I see..." Roantree raked cold eyes over him. "And could you guarantee that your Federation would never come looking for us?"

"No. All I could give you would be time."

"Time!" Roantree laughed eerily. "Time enough that we could learn to fight off a galaxy of slave-makers? 41 of us against billions -- and 200 years behind in science? Oh, sooner or later they'd swallow our sky. Then what would we be? How long could we last?" She turned on Spock. "How many of your Federation worlds are free of states? Even on their own land, how many people are free?"

"Within the Federation," Spock dutifully reported, "there are some 46 worlds devoid of formal government."

"46 out of thousands. Umhm. And what kind of worlds? What kind of life do their people lead?"

"39 of these have extremely small populations," Spock admitted. "They are usually mining worlds or research stations, housing an average of five individuals."

"No more than five?" Roantree laughed like shattering ice. "No doubt, much above that figure one gets laws and judges and planetary governors! Oh certainly, don't leave as many as ten people running around free -- much less forty -- or they might realize they can do without rulers altogether!"

"That leaves seven worlds of considerably larger population."

"What manner of people live on them?"

"They are... people devoted to the simple life. They avoid all use of machinery, preferring the limited technology of an earlier stage of civilization."

"Luddites!" Roantree pressed both fists to her forehead. "All this way across time and space, only to find more tyrants and Luddites! Mother of Mares! We lost everything: our city, our world, our ship, 16 of our crew and never mind how many relatives -- my husband and my two children -- for this! For this!"

For a moment she seemed to forget where she was. She pressed one forearm across her eyes; the other hand stretched straight upward, clawing blindly, clutching at stars just out of reach. The silent wave of pain hit Kirk like an avalanche. He fell to one side, held up only by the chair arm, gasping. He felt Spock clutch at him and dimly realized that the Vulcan had lunged across the intervening space and was trying to mind-meld with him, shield him against the incredible psychic battering, and it wasn't doing any good. Jenneth, stop! Stop it! he howled inside his skull. Turn it off me! Break, damn you! Faint, or cry, or scream, or do something for godsake like a Human woman and not--

The mindstorm stopped as if she'd thrown a switch. Kirk reeled back up, leaning on Spock, remembering that the mind-link worked both ways. Roantree pulled her hands down, revealing narrowed eyes and bared teeth. A tiger's face.

"You son of a bitch," she said. "You and your damned unthinking arrogance, despising us all along. Oh, we must have been easy to fool! A bunch of dumb savages who'd spent half their lives putting together one fragile rocket that could barely make it to our own moon -- and you sitting up there in your light-speed starship. How it must have galled you that we treated you like an equal, instead of falling down and worshiping you!"

"No!" Kirk choked on the word, vividly remembering another time, another primitive world, another Indian woman and her people and how he'd lived there. They did worship me! They thought I was god -- and did I ever deny it? Amnesia or no, I let them believe it!

"That's how you state-lovers think, isn't it? All masters and slaves, rank after rank of them, but never equals. Never. How you must have hated us for that! How you must have enjoyed using us, tricking us, proving your bloody superiority by playing clever games with our simple trust! Lord of Light, that's how every free people like us have ever fallen: betrayed by our state-loving allies -- overwhelmed by armies of state-loving neighbors! The Catalonians, the Makhnovistes, the Metis -- all, all betrayed and conquered by their so-called friends!"

"No, Jenneth! Never that!" Kirk tried to lunge free of Spock's restraining support, not much caring if she cut his throat in the next instant if only he could make her understand. "I never despised you! How in the hell could I? You know what I was like when you found me; crushed, desperate, half out of my mind -- the man who lost the universe! My lord, do you think I could have looked down on anybody? Then you came, and... Yes, you treated me like an equal, and I wasn't expecting that. It was more than I deserved." With the memory, feeling returned. Shaken, he dropped back into the chair. "I don't know how to tell you how... how grateful I was."

"But that didn't keep you from the same old betrayal." Roantree stalked toward him, halting just out of reach. "Why didn't you warn us? You had all those months; right up to the last day, you could have told us. We could have used

Bailey's plan, gone to warn the Moon People; they could have brought back Science and left Freedom alone. We could have had both! But you kept your damned silence, tricked us, made us build a universe we couldn't live in! Jim, why did you do it?"

"I had to! My crew, my people, all the worlds I knew--"

"You could have had them, and Freedom besides!"

"I couldn't be sure of that! Playing with time -- I couldn't take that risk!"

"We could! All of us on the ship, and the thousands more back home -- we were willing to risk it! Why weren't you?"

"I--" Migod, I really don't know how to explain it-- He turned a desperate look toward Spock, felt the feather-light contact of fingers on the side of his face, the quiet touch of the mind-link. How can I tell her? he appealed silently. No one knows how it was! You were dead and I was broken and I'd never told you--

I know, Jim, came the still reply. I always knew... Right there the thought cut off and Spock pulled his hand away as if it were burned.

--No, no, it had to be more than that--

"Why???" Roantree howled.

"I had to! All I'd ever known or believed in -- goddammit, Jenneth! It was my duty to put it back right! Can't you understand?"

Roantree took a step backward. The color slowly leached out of her skin, even out of her eyes. Kirk noted distractedly that from the braids down she was turning almost exactly the color of steel.

"You believe it," she almost whispered. "'Duty', you said. That old fatal word that makes sheep of men. You're not just going along with the way things are; you really believe it's right -- right! -- that someone else should do half your thinking for you! You believe in that horseshit!"

"Jenneth..." How the hell do I make her understand this when I don't exactly understand it myself?

"The one thing I never thought... not me, not in any universe... that any me could be so pliable, so easily made to believe... even willing to be fat slave and serve a master like -- like that!" She pointed to the now-empty screen.

"By god, I didn't do it for him! Not for Starfleet! I did it for my crew--" Yes! Yes! That's the truth! "They wouldn't have come back to me for anything else! It was for the crew, for my ship..." And now I'm going to lose it anyway!

Roantree smiled bleakly, as if she had finally found something she could recognize in this alien dimension. There she struck. "You fool, it isn't your ship. It's the government's ship. They own it, and they own you, and they can throw you away any time they set their minds to it."

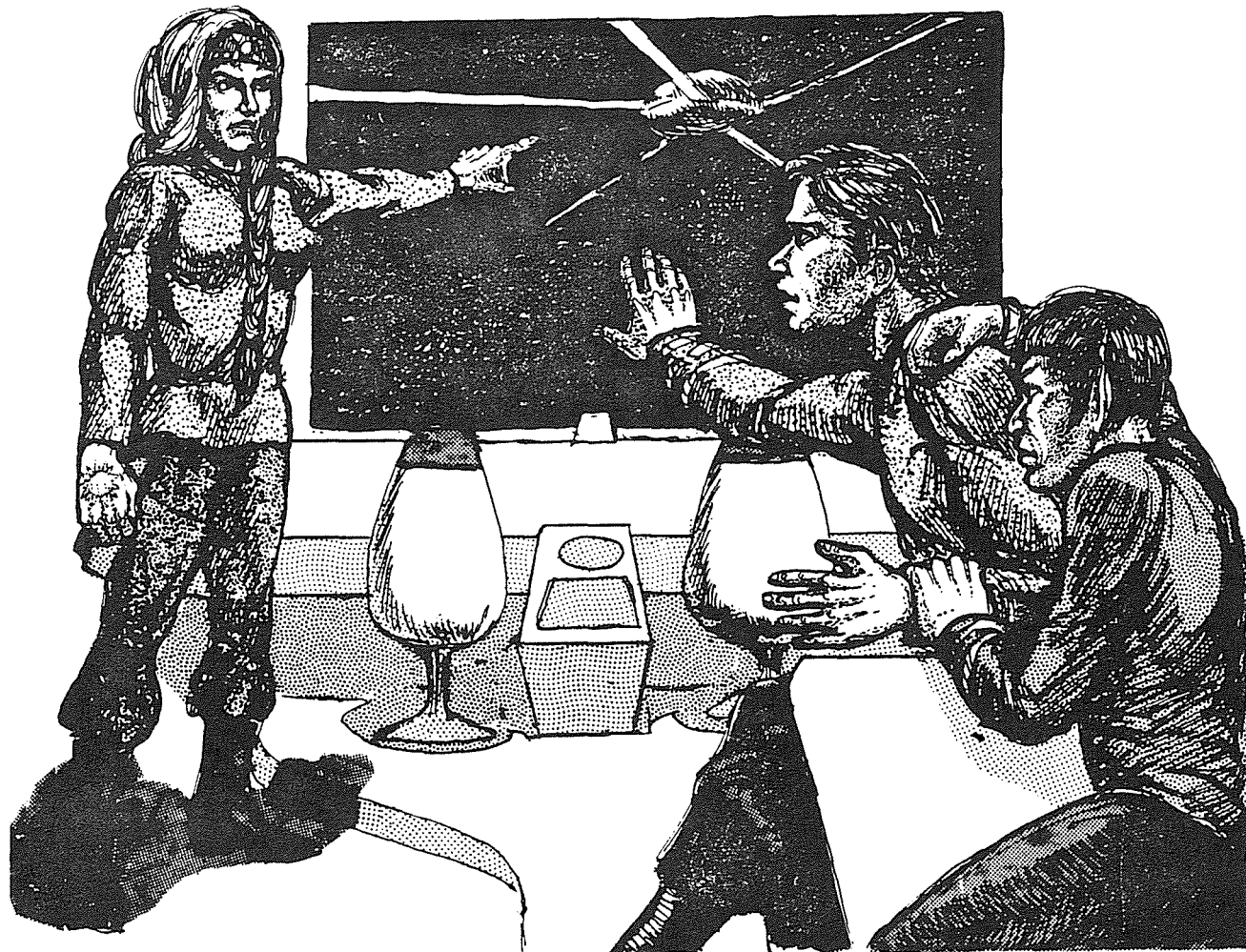
"No!"

"Oh, yes! Your bloody Admiral made that clear enough. He and his kind gave you this ship to play with, and power to lord it over other poor slaveys, and you thought that made you a Master, too. Well, it doesn't. You may be further up the pecking-order than most, but in the end, you're just another hireling."

Not even Spock could think of a suitable comeback.

"This was supposed to be a better universe!" Roantree looked around the bridge, face set, eyes gone silver-on-red. "Oh, you've got science, yes, but how do you live with it? For all your knowledge, you still live by the old lie: Might Makes Right. The final authority isn't the wisest, but the boys with the most guns. No matter how they dress themselves

up, or mouth long words, or send their slaves to do the actual robbing, torturing, and shooting, in the end they're nothing but overgrown bullies. What a way to run a galaxy! By all the gods that ever were, we did better than that! We may have been poor and backward, Jim, but our final authority was common sense and common consent -- and nobody had the biggest guns! So you tell me, you proudly 'civilized' people; just who are the real savages here?"



Uhura pressed her hands to her face and turned away.

"Co-ordinator," Spock ventured, his voice oddly rusty. "Bear in mind that Admiral Komack is undoubtedly attempting to reach the Starbase at this moment. Despite your earlier statement, I presume you would not wish a pitched battle between the base personnel and your crew. It would be advisable to gather your people and return to your ship as quickly as possible."

"Indeed." Roan tree turned an unreadable stare on him. "Where are they?"

"Ye mean ye don't know?" Scott cut in.

"I have no idea where my crew is, or what's happened to them. That's what I can up here to find out. What have you done with my people?"

"Jen," Kirk offered wearily, "I don't know where they are."

"Undoubtedly some of them are on the Galilei," Spock considered.

"We all are, now. All but you," said Bailey's voice, recognizable through the walkie-talkie.

Everybody jumped.

"You got away?" Roantree asked. "You all heard?"

"Everything said, and more. Quanna got the information out of the computer--"

Spock squeezed his eyes shut.

"--and we came over here and got the communications equipment wired in, and we've been monitoring every transmission we could catch. It's all true. Stand by to beam over. We have a lot to say to you."

"I'm ready." Roantree sighed and turned off the walkie-talkie.

"Wait!" Kirk lunged out of the chair, suddenly very certain that whatever the crew had in mind was not going to be pleasant. "You can't just hand yourself over to--"

"You shut up!" Roantree stopped him with an ice-colored glare. "You've done enough to me and mine. By all the gods, I wish I had died before I ever saw your lying face!" The transporter sparkle glowed around her. "...or your beautiful ship."

With the words, she faded.

"Scott, take over!" Kirk shouted, leaping for the turbolift doors.

"Captain--" Spock ran after him through the doors. "Where are you going?"

"Transporter room!" Kirk snapped. The turbolift obediently dropped. "I'm going after Jenneth. My lord, do you think I'd leave her to face this alone?"

"Considering the emotional state of the Anarchists at this time, such action may be construed as suicidal."

"Not if I can stop them! I'll get her out -- I'll get both of us out alive."

"Sir, you cannot leave the ship in a crisis situation such as--"

"It isn't my ship, remember?" Kirk's humorless grin looked horribly like Roantree's. "The five year mission is over! My very last assignment was to send the Anarchists safely away, and that's just what I'm doing!"

"What--"

"Can't you understand? It's over! The Enterprise doesn't need me any more!"

The doors opened before Spock could reply. Kirk bolted out, leaving the Vulcan no choice but to follow him.

* * *

Stardate 5856.0

Mendez to Komack, top priority:

UNABLE TO COMPLY WITH YOUR ARREST ORDER. PARTY UNKNOWN HAS NEATLY SABOTAGED BASE POWER SOURCE. WE ARE CURRENTLY ON BATTERY POWER, WHICH MUST BE CONSERVED FOR LIFE SUPPORT UNTIL WE REPAIR THE DAMAGE. TRANSPORTERS ARE TOTALLY OUT. GALILEI DOES NOT REPLY.

* * *

As Roantree shimmered into solidity on the transporter pad, she saw the whole crew waiting for her. All 40 of them, faces set and grim. Jean Battre-le-Diable was holding a familiar scroll, unrolled enough to show her own signature and thumbprint at the bottom. That was enough to tell Roantree why they were there.

Bailey was the first to break the silence. "Hot-Trot, you'd best go up to the bridge and turn the shields back on."

Hot-Trot nodded agreement and plodded out. Nobody else moved.

"If you heard the whole thing," said Roantree, leaden-voiced, "then you know the Admiral means to send the Starbase people against us. Have you taken other precautions?"

"They won't be doing anything for a while," Bailey answered with a faint smile. "All we have to worry about now is the Enterprise."

"Most of her people are asleep. It'll be awhile before they can mount an invasion force."

"What about shooting at us?"

"I don't think they'll risk it this close to the base."

"You can't guarantee that."

"You know very well that I can't guarantee anything right now."

Just then a growing hum filled the air, and a shower of sparkles grew and thickened above the transporter pad. Roantree jumped away from the solidifying forms as everyone else drew knives and shotguns. The two Enterprise officers materialized in a ring of steel.

"Hey!" shouted Hot-Trot's voice through the intercom. "I got the shields up too late! Two intruders have beamed aboard!"

"We know," replied Quannechota, at the transporter controls. "We have them. Come back down."

Spock looked around them, silently counting the weapons. Kirk looked to Roantree and then at Bailey, whom he assumed was in charge. "What are you going to do with Jenneth?" he almost shouted.

"It's a Community Tribunal, Jim," Roantree explained. "That's what we have instead of courts and judges and trials. Everybody sees, hears, argues, and decides. You should remember."

"I see." Kirk took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. "What's the exact charges?"

"Betrayal of sworn trust," said Quannechota, "in a situation where lives are at stake."

Roantree shivered. Kirk felt it.

"Captain," Spock murmured, keeping close, "it is imperative that you detach yourself mentally from Jenneth Roantree. If you intend to save her, you must be able to think rationally and perhaps move very quickly; you cannot do that if you remain entangled in her emotions."

"I'm... trying."

Hot-Trot ran in just then, glared at Kirk, unslung her shotgun, and aimed it at him. The others nodded approval and lowered their weapons. Knives went back into belt-sheaths, boots, and sleeves. Hell of a way to assign security, Kirk thought.

From somewhere, the ugly earthenware cup appeared. This time it was empty. Hot-Trot got it first; she held it in one hand, bracing the shotgun butt against her belly, and didn't take her eyes off her target. "Braider," she demanded, "when did you first learn the truth about this place?"

"On the Enterprise bridge, about ten minutes ago. You heard."

Jean Battré-le-Diable grabbed the cup. "You said that someone -- that Chapel-Doctor -- had warned you. What did you mean by that?"

"Five minutes before, she came and woke me up. She warned me to get all of us onto the Galilei and fly away fast. She said we'd been tricked, and that the planet was a trap. Then she ran off. I didn't know what to make of it, and I couldn't raise anyone on the walkie-talkie, so I went to find out."

There was a mutter of confirming voices. Apparently they'd all heard Roantree's attempt to call them.

"That was when you turned the walkie-talkie back on?"

"Yes. I hadn't realized until then that it was turned off."

"How did it get turned off?"

"I don't know. Accident... or maybe Uhura did it."

"Let me." Quannechota took the cup. "Jen-- Braider, where were you from the last time you reported in until you next used the walkie-talkie?"

"Uhura's cabin, talking about Starfleet. She wanted me to join it."

"What?" shouted several voices, including Kirk's.

"What did she tell you?" Quannechota cut through the noise.

"She said it was a big co-op, with more clout than anyone else in the-- Alliance, and that if we wanted to make changes in Alliance customs, that was the place to start."

"And did you agree to join them?"

"Yes, eventually. I told--" She was interrupted by another rattle of mixed voices, and waited until it stopped. "I signed the form, and told her to hold onto it. There was still the new planet to deal with, and I didn't know when or if I'd have time for..."

"What did she promise you?" roared Bailey, snatching the cup. "Did they offer you a ship for selling us out?"

"She didn't promise me anything!" Some of Roantree's old fire flared momentarily. "She sure as hell didn't tell me the whole truth; I didn't even see all of the application."

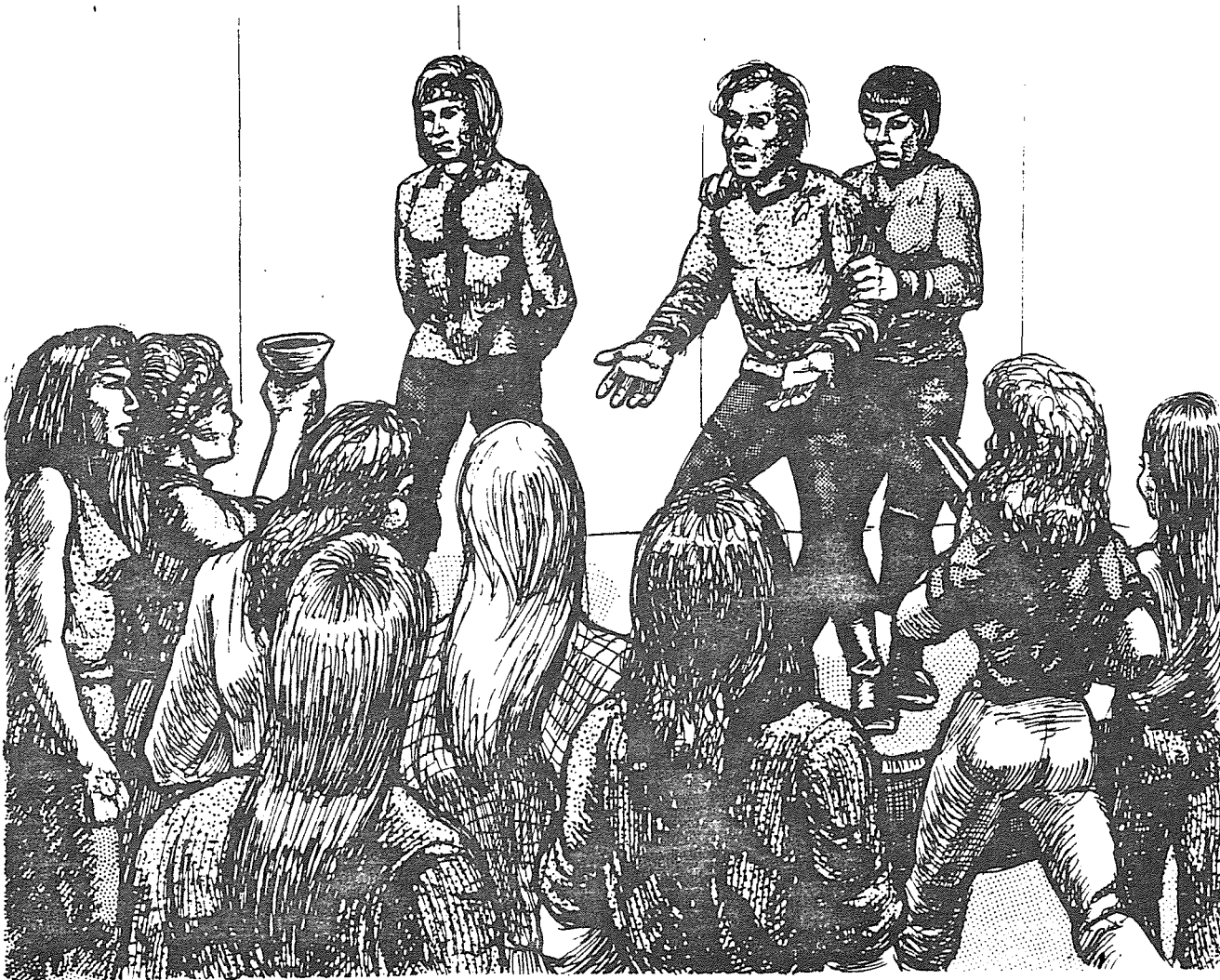
"Always read the fine print," Bailey quoted acidly.

"Didn't think of it." Roantree shut her eyes.

"There's a lot you didn't think about."

"I know."

There was an ugly rumble of assenting voices. Got to stop it, Kirk thought. Divert them before it turns into a lynch-



mob... Too fast for Spock to realize and prevent him, Kirk lunged at Bailey and snatched the cup out of her hands. A dozen arms raised to stop him from jumping off the platform, but no one tried to take back the cup. "Enough of this!" he shouted, clutching the cup with both hands. "Damn you, why are you turning on her? I'm the one who tricked you!"

"Jim, no!" Spock tried to intercept him, then stopped dead as he saw Hot-Trot whip the shotgun up to her shoulder and aim at his head. She cannot fire a warning shot, he realized. It would damage the transporter. She must shoot only at Jim or me... and I believe she can shoot faster than I could evade...

"It was my fault, not hers!" Kirk insisted. "I'm the one who hid the facts, locked up the computer, made excuses every time you got too close to the truth! The lies were all mine, and she was just one more victim! If you want revenge on someone, come after me!"

Astonishingly bitter laughter rippled around the crescent-line of Anarchists.

"No use, Jim," Roantree tried to explain. "They already know..."

"You still do not see it, do you?" said Quannechota, her expression openly pitying. "You are not one of us. You made that clear many times. Despite all the offers we made to you, you remained always an outsider."

Ann Bailey came up and took the cup from him and handed it to Jean Battre-le-Diable. She took Kirk's wrists and pushed his hands up before his face so that he could see their unmarked backs. "No moon-scar, no sun-tattoo," she said. "Nothing of us about you. What's there to condemn? You're not one of us, that we can judge. You're just another enemy."

She shoved him toward the back of the platform. A dozen more Anarchists climbed on the platform and shoved them hard against the back wall, though Spock didn't require much pushing. Hot-Trot changed position to keep them in her sights, and

the rest of the crowd pulled back into its tight crescent around the transporter pad. Kirk risked a shout of, "Why her? Why?"

"Fool," Roantree sighed. "And you flapped the work 'duty' at me, as if that explained everything you did."

"We do not use that concept," Quannechota explained. "For us there is only personal responsibility. Perhaps for you who are hedged with 'laws' and 'duties', this means little; for us, however, who have no such force-propped outward authority, one's sworn word means much. Perhaps you have never heard the line from Kipling, 'Virtue springs from iron within -- not lead without'. Can you understand it?"

Kirk shook his head. This convoluted alien ethics confounded him.

"Idiote, tu ne comprends pas," Jean sneered. "Jenneth is our Co-ordinator! Do you think we would lightly place our lives, our trust, in someone else's hands? To do as someone else says, without thought, without knowing nothing of that one's mind? Putting upon such a one no pledge so terrible as to prevent any temptation of power?"

"What--"

"Braider's Oath, Jim." Roantree favored him with a faint, wintry smile. "The 'Co-ordinator's Prayer' is part of it. You remember that. '...when my number comes up, when the Great Unknown deals me the ace of spaces, be it all my own.'"

'Let none I care for suffer or die for me.' "I remember."

"Jenneth!" Spock pulled away from the wall, unmistakeable horror showing through the cracks of his Super-Vulcan mask. "Does that poem also have a tune? Is that, too, a Song of Power?"

"Of course. That was part of the bargain when I bought my share of the ship."

"The rest of us," Bailey commented, "paid only land or livestock or trade goods. But then, the rest of us were never in danger of leading anyone. The Co-ordinator had to pledge something more."

"What did you pledge?" Spock insisted. "To what did that song commit you?"

"To do right, or die." Roantree's vision fixed on something far off and difficult. "I swore by my live -- never to lead them wrong!"

"That is utterly unrealistic! All beings are capable of error!"

Even Vulcans? Quannechota thought at him, loud and clear.

"Oh, sure," said Hot-Trot. "Everybody makes mistakes sooner or later -- but the Braider must be questioned in full council for every last of them."

"For a minor error, one simply loses one's job," Quannechota explained. "This is an automatic prevention of accumulated power."

"And for major errors?" Kirk asked, already guessing the answer.

"Exile or death," said Roantree.

"This," said Bailey, "qualifies as one hell of a major error."

"But it wasn't her fault!" Kirk tried to push his way forward, ignoring Hot-Trot's gun muzzle. Spock forcibly pulled him back. "I tricked her! I tricked all of you! How can you condemn her for being misled when you were all equally fooled?"

"Jim," Quannechota sighed, "because of our trust, the Co-ordinator is required not to be so easily deluded as the rest of us."

"Much less easier than the rest of us." Bailey took the cup and glared at Roantree. "So many times we noticed things weren't quite right, contradictions, little oddities in the things these people said and did. Once they even admitted to taking up with the old tyrannies, remember? And every time -- every last time, Jenneth -- you were the one who smoothed it over, explained it away, urged us to trust these strangers. Why? Why, Jenneth?"

"Look where our distrust got us," Roantree countered, turning to look Bailey straight in the eyes. "If we'd told him the truth about ourselves before the last big raid on High Harbor, he could have helped us. We could have stopped the invaders before they ever got to the Library!" Her teeth ground on the last word.

Bailey rocked slightly on her heels as if the invoked memory was a physical blow, but she didn't look away. "Yes," she said. "Trust him for a battle. For a whole town, maybe. But for a whole universe?! That much, unproven? Goddammit, Jenneth, just because you could trust him in some things didn't mean you could trust him in everything. Trust isn't an all-or-nothing thing!"

Roantree dropped her eyes to the floor. "For me, it was."

"You fool."

"Yes."

"Because of me!" Kirk yelled frantically. "I knew she was the one I had to convince. I did everything I could think of to fool her, used every trick in the book, even the mind-link, anything! I did it, damn you! It was me!"

"Oh, shut up, Jim," sighed Roantree. "We already know what you did. Can't you see that it doesn't matter? Repenting your bloody sins doesn't do a rat's-ass worth of good after the fact."

"No..." Kirk pressed a hand to his forehead. "No, I guess it damned well doesn't."

For a moment he looked as if he was going to fall down. Spock gripped his shoulders to steady him and desperately flashed a thought to Guannechota: Will any harm be done to him?

No, Guannechota thought back. Neither can he help. Do not let him interfere. I will give what help I can, but--

Jean Battre-le-Diable snagged the cup. "Le question," he said, "is simple. Braider, from the first moment we met this man, we knew there was something wrong about him. He was strange, not like us, not right somehow -- and therefore simply unpredictable. Knowing that, why in hell did you trust him?"

It took Roantree a long time to answer. "...Because," she said, not looking at Kirk, "because he is me. Myself in a mirror. I never thought... never had any reason... to distrust myself. Not until now."

Kirk ground his fists into his eyes.

There was dead silence all around the circle. Ann Bailey held out the cup to whoever wanted to take it. No one did.

"Captain," Spock whispered, shaking him, "there is nothing more you can do for her. You must pull your mind clear of hers. Withdraw now!"

Kirk dropped his hands, revealing a face as grey as Roantree's. "I can't, Spock. She's me, and we're in this together. To the finish."

"No, you are not." Right there, Spock stopped waiting for orders. Quickly and firmly he clamped both hands on Kirk's head and slid into a forced mind-meld.

--Spock, what are you...? No! Kirk grabbed the imprisoning hands and tried to pull them away, but Spock grimly overrode the motor neural signals, and the muscles stopped obeying. Damn you, this is insubordination! Mutiny, Spock! For a moment he could actually feel the Vulcan rifling through his memory of Starfleet regulations for a suitable excuse. Open rebellion! Insubordination! Spock--

Yes, sir. Spock gave up alibi-hunting. Now we are all insubordinate together. Logical or not, I cannot let you throw away your life... Ignoring the silent yells of protest, Spock began constructing a mental shield. Layer by layer he built up the wall as long as he could maintain contact, using every technique he knew to shut out Jenneth Roantree.

Kirk could do nothing but lean again him, panting, helpless, raging, bitterly accepting. This long-familiar feel of Roantree's presence dwindled and thinned out. It felt as if the front of his mind were filling up with cotton.

"That's it, then," said Bailey, putting down the cup. She climbed onto the platform, took two fast steps across it, and yanked Roantree's headband down over her eyes.

Roantree jumped, one hand automatically starting up to yank the headband back, the other reaching for her nearest dagger. There was a fast, multiple, silk-whispering sound throughout the room as more than twenty daggers whipped out of their sheaths. Roantree froze in mid-motion, then slowly lowered her hands.

Spock, let go of me! Kirk pleaded, struggling ineffectively in the Vulcan's grip. Even without the mind-link, do you think I can just stand here and watch?!

Jim, you cannot help her! Spock insisted, straining to hold up the shield. They will kill you if you try, and I cannot allow myself that. I would take you from here if I could. Spare you this... and myself... but there is no way... Don't look. Please...

"First," said Bailey, holding her dagger high, point up.

Jean Battre-le-Diable sighed, pulled out his knife, and likewise held it point up.

One by one, around the curved line, the blades were lifted -- always point first.

...The last meeting at High Harbor.. Kirk didn't turn his eyes away. Unanimous... and then the death. Sacrifice. The Solstice Rite -- But this time it's real! Why her, why not me? I was willing! Willing, so many times... The cruel gods have grown tired of my blood. They want a different victim...

Jim, please! Spock was shaking with effort.

"Abstain," said Hot-Trot not taking her eyes off the Enterprise officers. "Abstain," echoed perhaps half a dozen more voices. Perhaps a dozen feet stepped backwards out of the ring.

The line of raised blades crept down to Quannechota. Wordlessly she drew a plain throwing knife from her belt and held it up. A leaf-rustling of indrawn breath shivered around the circle; she held it by the blade, point down.

"Figured you would..." Bailey murmured.

Kirk held his breath, daring to hope.

Quannechota moved abruptly, stepping up onto the platform. In front of Roantree she turned and dropped to one knee. At first Spock wondered if that was meant as a submissive gesture; then he saw her left hand slide into the now-reachable top of her boot. Another knife was there as everyone could see. She held the uplifted throwing knife by the tip now, ready to let it fly. No one could mistake her meaning.

...You cannot fight them all, Spock considered.

No, he felt her faint answer, only make an attack costly...

"Have it your way, then," said Bailey, sounding oddly relieved. "Exile it is."

Just one dissenting vote?! Kirk remembered the last vote taken in High Harbor in the area ringed with tattered flags. More than twelve; a jury of the whole community. And it still has to be unanimous! Only if they're all agreed, beyond a

shadow of a doubt... We share that!

Not utterly different, Spock recognized. Not beyond understanding.

"Tien," sighed Jean Battre-le-Diable, lowering his knife. "Let's get it over with."

After a few seconds of shuffling, four of the Anarchists who had abstained stepped up onto the platform. They still held knives, but carried them low. Quannechota rose to her feet and slipped cautiously aside. Two of them gripped Roantree's arms, but the restraint was unnecessary; she didn't move. The other two somberly lifted their knives, took hold of Roantree's braids close to her head, set the blades against her hair and began cutting.



Roantree still didn't move, but under the blindfold her face stretched tight, pulled into a soundless cry. Even behind the thick layers of shielding, Kirk faintly heard the tolling: No... No... No... Spock groaned quietly under the impact.

The four participants let go of Roantree's arms, dropped the severed braids at her feet, and stepped back. In rough unison they chanted: "Until your hair can touch your waist, keep away from us." Then they turned and walked off the platform.

...How efficient. Spock noted through the growing dizziness. Undisguisable... term of sentence... He realized that he couldn't hold Kirk much longer. Hoping that the implanted shielding would last until he could get the captain to safety, he cautiously withdrew from the meld and dropped his hands to Kirk's shoulders.

Kirk stumbled, caught himself, swore quietly and rubbed his head. He wasn't really thinking of Spock, nor even of the situation before him; for the moment, all he could think of was the day -- almost a year before -- when his own crew had exiled him. It was quieter... less ceremony... but at least they left me the ship...

There was no word, motion, or thought from Roantree. She might as well have been a statue.

"C'est fini," said Jean. "Now let's get out of here."

"There's still the little matter of choosing a new Co-Ordinator," Bailey reminded him. "Who-all's had the training?"

After a moment's hesitation, Guannechota stepped forward. "I have," she said. "There is no time now, but I can take the oath as soon as we are safely away from here."

The Anarchists looked at her, then each other, and wordlessly nodded agreement. They stepped out of the fragmented circle, turned and streamed toward the doorway, purposefully heading off for unknown tasks. A few of them caught Kirk and Spock and pushed them, not very roughly, onto stations of the transporter pad. Kirk shook free of the impelling hands and turned to see Quanna standing very close to Roantree, clutching her arm and whispering something in her ear.

"Hurry it up, Quanna," called Hot-Trot, backing away from the platform. "We have to move now."

Guannechota kissed Roantree, bent down and picked up one of the severed braids, and stepped away.

"No, wait!" Kirk reached toward her, suddenly realizing what she meant to do. "Quanna, you can't leave me! You said you'd stay -- Dammit, in spite of everything, you're still my wife!"

"That ends here." Her eyes were nakedly grieving, but her lean jaw was set firm. "I am the only other trained pilot and Co-Ordinator. If I do not go with them, my people will most certainly not survive."

"Quanna."

"I have responsibilities too, Jim. As surely as we are social animals, I do." She pulled the wedding ring off her finger and handed it to him. "I hereby divorce thee," she said. Then she turned and walked off the transporter platform.

Roantree's blindfolded face turned to follow the sound of her retreating footsteps.

Kirk closed his hand on the empty ring. "Lost..." was all he said. Spock started to reach toward him, then stopped, realizing that he could do nothing to shield away this pain; it was all Kirk's own.

Miserable at his own helplessness, Spock watched Guannechota step behind the transporter console. Their eyes met for an instant, and he looked away. He noticed the other braid lying at Roantree's motionless feet. For once driven by purely impulse, he bent down and picked up the braid.

"Shields down!" called a voice on the intercom. "Beam down!"

Guannechota pulled down the energizing lever. The transporter hummed. The room faded into sparkle-effect which in turn gave way to another room. There was a slight jolt as their feet touched the floor; they'd materialized approximately an inch too high.

Roantree swayed and dropped to her knees, slipped sideways, propped herself up on stiff arms.

Spock glanced around the familiar chamber. "Captain, we are in the transporter room of the Enterprise."

"Yes." Kirk snapped his head up, remembering, then bolted to the intercom and pounced it open. "Kirk to Bridge," he said. "Uhura, put me through to the Galilei, tight-beam, top security."

"Yessir." The moments crawled before she answered again. "They're not responding, sir. In fact... Captain, they're moving away!"

"I know it! Keep that channel open anyway!"

"Contact, Sir."

"Quanna!" Kirk shouted to her across the silence. "Use the Cloaking Device! Don't stop until you're out of Federation space!" Then he waited, holding his breath, feeling Spock's eyes boring into his back.

"Captain," Scott reported, "the Galilei just disappeared, right in front of our eyes. She's cloaked. Nobody can find her now."

Thank all the gods that ever were... Kirk shut his eyes and sagged against the bulkhead.

"Sir," Uhura called back, "I'm getting an odd transmission. It's from nearby, but I can't pinpoint the source."

"Send it through," said Kirk. I can guess who it is...

What came through was part of a song, one last message from the Galilei, as he'd known it would be.

"I'll tip my hat to the new constitution
Take my vows for the new revolution
I ain't free, but there's change all around,
So I'll pick up my guitar and play,
Just like yesterday,
And I'll get on my knees and pray--
We don't get fooled again!
Won't get fooled again!"

Right, Kirk understood. Run loose in the galaxy. Survive. Go ahead and be a threat to us. We deserve it! The whole galaxy deserved what you and yours will be...

"Sir, even that signal's gone," Uhura notified him.

"O' course I couldna say for certain that yon's a cloakin' effect..." Scott's voice took on a mock-official tone. "Heaven knows whot tha Anarchists could ha' done wi' tha ship, considerin' a' tha tinkerin' they've been doin' on her. For a' I know, they might ha' misused tha antimatter controls an', ah, dematerialized themsel's. In any case, I canna tell where they've gone."

"Right, Scotty." Kirk smiled weakly, wiping sweat off his face. "I suppose we'll have to report that to Starfleet."

We are all insubordinate together, Spock considered. All lying, all breaking regulations... But how could we do otherwise? There were personal responsibilities that allowed no other course of action...

Kirk switched off the intercom and rested his forehead against the cool surface of the bulkhead. Quannechota's ring felt warm and live in his hand. "Clean getaway," he murmured. "Ship and supplies... They could run forever, or settle anywhere. They'll find a way. They're born survivors..." But what about me? And Jenneth? Time's great losers!

Behind him he heard Roantree stir, drawing a rasping breath, and quietly start to sing. Of course, he smiled. A song for every occasion. What song for such losses, Jenneth? What grand finale? 'Ashes, Ashes...

"Darkness, Darkness -- be my pillow.
Take my hand and let me sleep
In the coolness of your shadow

In the silence of your deep..."

Without surprise, Kirk understood what she was doing. Might have guessed she wouldn't wait three months... not like me... He wondered if the resigned lethargy he felt was his own grief, the result of Spock's shielding, or mental bleed-over from Roantree.

"Darkness, Darkness -- hide my yearning
For the things that cannot be.
Keep my mind,
Keep my mind from constant turning
Toward the things I'll never see."

"Captain," Spock nervously tapped his shoulder for attention. "I suspect that Citizen Roantree's suffering from shock and should be taken to Sickbay."

"It won't do much good."

Roantree's voice soared effortlessly after the notes, but her tone had become as thin as a thread.

"Darkness, Darkness -- cold and lonesome
Is the day that brings me here.
I have known the edge of silence
I have known the death of fear..."

"Captain!" Spock insisted, a horrible suspicion clawing at him. "Why should a sun-worshipper sing an appeal to darkness?"

"It's her Death-Song," Spock. Can't you hear her growing weaker? When she finishes the last verse, she'll die."

"Darkness, Darkness -- be my blanket.
Cover me with the endless night.
Take away,
Take away the pain of knowing.
Fill the emptiness of right...
Now...
Right now..."

Spock ran across the intervening space, clamped his hand to Roantree's shoulder and squeezed. The singing stopped in mid-note, Roantree slumped bonelessly to the deck. Spock bent over her, yanked her headband out of the way, and pressed his fingers to either side of her head.

Kirk pulled away from the bulkhead, the eerie lethargy abruptly gone. The exhaustion he felt now was entirely his own. "Your shielding didn't last long... Spock, what are you doing?"

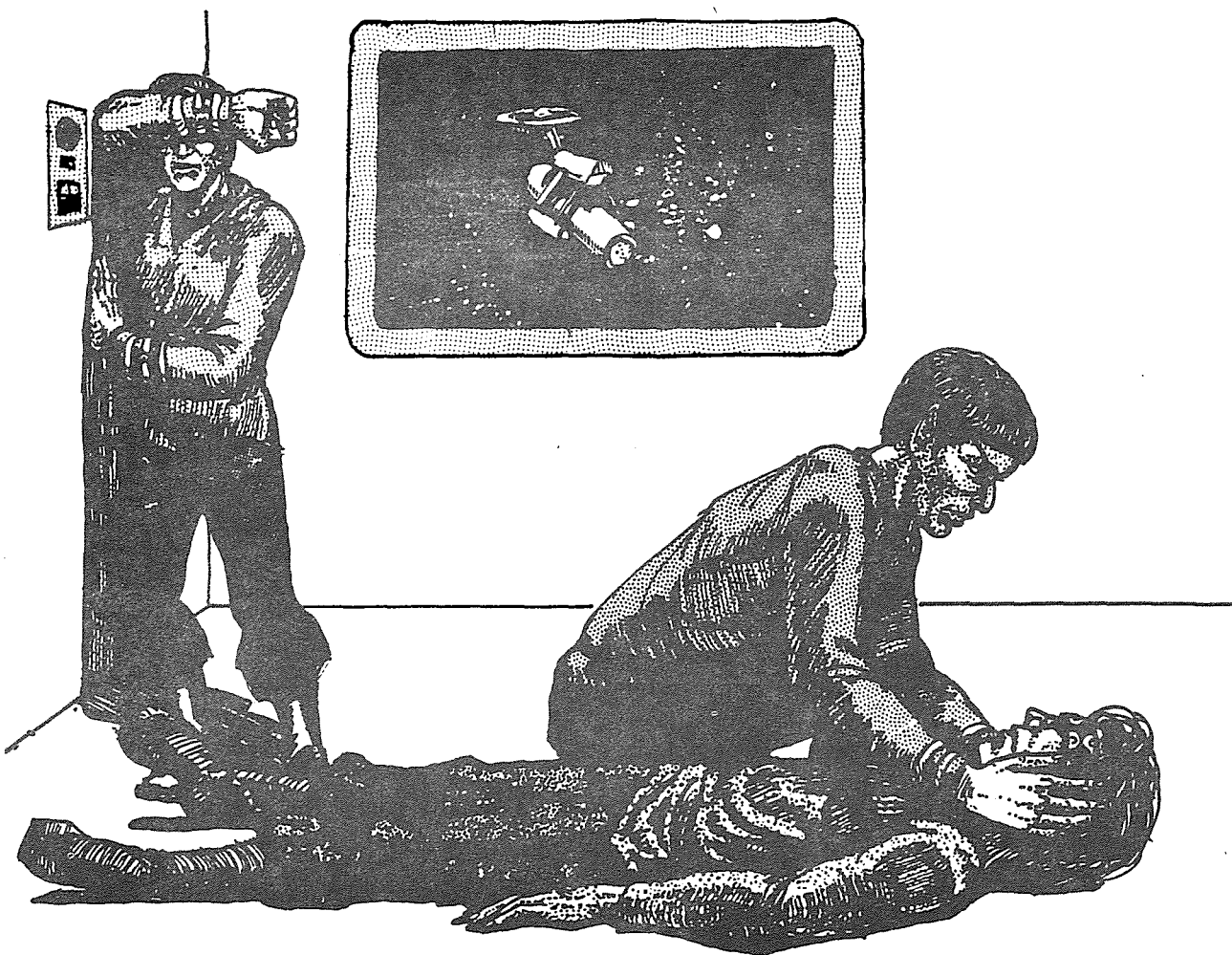
Spock was crouched over the unconscious Co-Ordinator, eyes squeezed shut. "...Forget..." he whispered. "Forget!"

"It's impossible," Kirk shook his head. "The effect is set too deep. She'll sooner forget her own heartbeat."

Spock blinked, pulled his hands away, withdrew. "I... could not uproot the entire pattern, true. However, I managed to blank conscious memory of the words. If ever she hears the song again she will remember it, but she cannot recall it by herself."

"She may not thank you for that."

"Illogical." Spock reset his face to the usual impassivity, pulled Roantree into his arms and lurched to his feet. "I



must take her to Sickbay," he said.

"Go ahead. I'll be along in a minute." Kirk returned to the intercom. "Kirk to Bridge. Give me Mr. Scott, please."

Stardate 5956.1

Mendez to Kowack, Top Priority:

CRISIS PAST, BASE POWER-SOURCE RESTORED. ANARCHIST THREAT NEUTRALIZED. NO HARM DONE.

Kowack to Mendez, Top Priority:

EXPLAIN, DAMNIT.

Mendez to Kowack:

OUR GUESTS DIDN'T LIKE OUR HOSPITALITY. APPARENTLY THEY TRIED TO GIVE THE GALILEI EXTRA EQUIPMENT BY CANNIBALIZING PARTS FROM THE BASE AND THE ENTERPRISE. IT DIDN'T WORK. SENSORS OUT DUE TO BREAKDOWN, BUT AS NEARLY AS WE CAN RECONSTRUCT, THE GALILEI WENT OUT ON AN UNAUTHORIZED PRACTICE-RUN, ATTEMPTED USING ITS JURY-RIGGED EQUIPMENT, AND SUFFERED DISASTEROUS RESULTS. GALILEI LOST WITH ALL HANDS. SOLVES THE PROBLEM RATHER NEATLY, DOESN'T IT?

Kowack to Mendez:

LUCKY FOR YOU.

Mendez to Kirk, Confidential:

CRISIS PAST. ADMIRAL SATISFIED. DON'T DO THAT AGAIN; I'M GETTING TOO OLD FOR THIS SORT OF THING.

WITH THE ANARCHIST PROBLEM OUT OF THE WAY, YOU HAVE NO FURTHER ORDERS EXCEPT TO STAND BY FOR SHIP REFITTING, CREW R&R, PROMOTION AND REASSIGNMENT. IT'LL TAKE WEEKS. RELAX AND MAKE THE MOST OF IT, JIM. I THINK YOU'VE EARNED IT.

Kirk to Mendez:

THANKS.

McCoy met him at the door to Sickbay, looking worried. "No need for explanations," he said, hustling Kirk into the treatment room. "Spock told me most of it, and Christine filled in the rest. I've sent Spock off to get some sleep, and now it's your turn. You sit down while I check you over and get you something for that fatigue. After that, you go straight to bed and--"

"Not now, Bones. How's Jenneth?"

"Asleep. She ought to stay that way for a good while, too. The emotional effects... Well, recovery's going to be pretty rough, and there's no way around it."

"I know!" Tired as he was, Kirk couldn't sit still. He paced around the treatment room, McCoy trailing nervously behind him. "What now? What's going to happen to her?"

"I don't know, Jim. Nobody made any plans for this contingency. She's been lucky enough not to break any serious regulations -- at least as far as Starfleet knows," he winced under the sharp look Kirk threw at him, and hurried on. "Even telling off the Admiral -- being technically a civilian, she could get away with it. As for her past record, well, all we have is that she comes from a world outside the Federation, performed a valuable service, and has a lot of useful skills. Aside from that, nothing."

"Completely in limbo. No world, no people, no home..." Kirk shivered and hitched up his shoulders. "I want to see her."

"She's asleep. What good would it do? Jim, don't--"

But Kirk was already striding toward the door. McCoy ran after him, complaining, unheeded. It didn't take long to find the right room. Kirk walked in, stopped at the foot of the bed, and looked. Just looked.

"Stop it," McCoy whispered, shaking his arm. "It won't help her to kick yourself like this. You know as well as I do, there was no other way you could have handled it."

"Wrong. There were other ways."

"You had your orders--"

"Betrayal," Kirk said very quietly. "I couldn't help betraying somebody, no matter which way I turned. I wish I'd had the courage to betray the ones who deserve it!"

"Jim!" McCoy pleaded, trying to pull him away.

"Play god, unmake galaxies, change Time..." Kirk glanced briefly at McCoy, his face tracked with unnoticed tears. "Oh, you can do it! It's possible! Anything's possible... But at what price?"

"Enough," said McCoy, looking around for a hypo. He'd never seen Kirk cry before, and the implications scared him. "You've paid enough."

"The price is betraying yourself, Bones! Look." He pointed to the motionless body on the treatment couch. "She ends where I started. The 'Interrex'. She's taken my place in hell."



McCoy looked: first at Roantree, then at Kirk, then back again. ...It never really sank in before... he thought, shivering.

Lying as she was, breasts flattened by the heavy blanket, her shorn hair pressed close by the pillow, her face lined and ridged with pain even in sleep, Jenneth looked more like James Kirk than his own reflection did.

"Take the load off, Manny.
Take the load for free.
Take the load off, Manny,
And you put the load
Right on me."

-- "The Weight"
20th Century American Song

A BRIEF ENCOUNTER IN A TIMELESS WAR

by James Van Hise

On the screen, the Romulan ship began to move. It neatly ducked away from the hurtling rock and fired a long narrow bolt at the Cannibal Wheel. The bolt hit and several degrees of the Wheel's rim incandesced and disappeared. The noise on the intercom went dead and the now unbalanced space station lurched in its orbit and began to fall, slowly but steadily, toward the defenseless planet below. From her gunport flew another rock, then another and another, in quick succession. Some of the rocks struck the pursuing war-bird and jarred it enough to ruin the aim of the second disruptor bolt. The Enterprise stood dead silent as they watched the Anarchist craft go down fighting, and the war-bird dropping after it like a striking hawk.

Had the Romulans even known what the primitive space station was hurling at it? Had it even detected that the Cannibal Wheel's armament consisted of an ancient cannon which fired rockets and scrap metal canisters propelled by the explosive gas pressure by expanding water? If they had noted that little fact (and at best it was a little fact), their usually impassive features might have been split by a hideous grin of deadly amusement.

The Wheel fell faster, spinning end over end. Radio contact with the ground had been lost. No matter, they would learn what happened soon enough.

In the Wheel, Charlie was struggling for control even though he knew his situation was hopeless. He had told Jenneth, Kirk and the others on the Enterprise, to get out and leave them behind. Anything their giant spaceship would try here was pointless. What mattered was that they succeed, and they wouldn't be able to if the Enterprise, their only hope, was crippled by the invasion forces. Charlie had seen the Enterprise dodge the attack of the strange, metallic birds of prey and then seemingly vanish. Another of Kirk's miracles, he assumed.

He crawled along the narrow deck, trying to regain his footing. The air was heating up like the inside of a pressure cooker, and if he'd thought it would have made any difference, he would have sealed up his pressure suit and donned his helmet. But there was no way out. Their only other rocket, in High Harbor, had been destroyed in an attack weeks before, and the remaining one had crashed on the Moon. There was nothing to do except die.

The Wheel was cartwheeling into the atmosphere, heating up as it plummeted, much the same way the ancient spacelab had some three hundred years ago. He wondered if his demise would create as much ruckus as that had. Things like that had just added to the examples of misused technology which the Luddites had cited when founding their primitive anti-science society.

Pulling all of the weapons levers, he fired all the cannons at once, unloading a final farewell fusillade at this unknown enemy. I hope Kirk got away all right, he thought.

A flash of pain, a wave of agony, and the deck seemed to ripple and dissolve underneath him. Please, let the thing rupture and lose the atmosphere so he didn't have to be around to feel himself burn. Dying like a shooting star was not a beautiful way to go if you were on the inside looking out. He felt as if he were baking already, but he still didn't pass out. His breath wheezed out through his scurfy black beard and he no longer felt the steaming temperatures that were rising from the floor as it began to buckle. The skin of his exposed hands had crisped where it touched the deck, but he couldn't even feel it.

Finally, the makeshift space station, assembled as it was from bits and pieces of the relics of a long gone society, ruptured and died. It shattered into countless pieces which winked out in flashes of destruction as they cascaded downward. The first victims of the Romulan invasion of Earth had died along with the first extraterrestrial accomplishment of a drastically altered society.

On board his great warship the Raptorian, a sardonic Commander Decius grinned his amusement at the primitive device of a soon-to-be conquered race, which he had just swatted disdainfully from the sky. He found its fiery demise a beautiful thing to behold.

In the nearby flagship of the descending flock, a weary and weathered Commander sighed in disgust at the images playing out across his screen. "Such a senseless waste of lives and power. Their orbiting device was quite primitive. Its weaponry was a mockery at best, and yet Decius expends his precious energy to strike it from his path instead of passing it by as one

would a harmless cur yapping at one's heels."

The voice was time-worn and combat-weary, seemingly directed at everyone and no one, but the aged Centurion at the Commander's side knew it was intended for him. He recognized what it meant. His commander, once the most aggressive in the fleet, had grown tired and sickened by the endless slaughter and conquest merely for its own sake. The Commander had developed conscience and sensitivity, qualities which are seldom embraced by a soldier. This troubled the centurion greatly. He, too, had been raised and nurtured by the Romulan martial philosophy of the stronger subjugating the weaker, yet he, too, had witnessed Decius' casual butchery with greater and greater alarm. The Centurion could not help but wonder; were even he to stand in Decius' way, would Decius not smite him down as well?

The Centurion had brooded over this question for a long time. This latest incident merely served to heighten and underscore his fears. Decius tried too hard, and men like that had no friends, only people they used. There were too many wars and conflicts to find oneself battling someone within his own ranks. If only there were some way Decius could be restrained before he went too far.

"If he wastes his power, Commander," observed the Centurion, the glimmer of hope forming, "then he will find himself in a bitter way when it comes time for us to return."

The Commander's brow furrowed and a distant smile touched his lips.

"Perhaps Decius' great prowess in battle should not go unrewarded. He seems so eager to lay waste to this minor acquisition, so I shall see to it that he has plenty of time to do so. I shall appoint him commander pro-tem of the occupation forces. When he has demonstrated what he can do with this planet, how he can make it serve the Praetor, then he will be promoted... in a year or two."

* * *

Decius led the battle fleet in a glorious procession down to the planet's surface, his ship darting out in front of the flagship to seek new game.

"What do the sensors detect of the armament below?" he snapped at his pilot. Decius lusted for the uncanny thrills of combat, the engagement with an enemy, the crushing of a foe under his superior might.

"Commander, the sensors show no armament at all. It is a primitive, undefended planet."

"WHAT?!" he roared. "But that orbiting outpost we destroyed indicated a more advanced technology than that! How can there be nothing?"

"All we can detect in the way of advanced development is one settlement which appeared to have a primitive launching site of recent origin, but it was destroyed before we arrived."

"No!" Decius slammed his fist on the console. He would not be denied the glory of combat. There had to be something, somewhere, somehow! Besides, in order to conquer a world, the people had to know they had been conquered. They had to realize they had new masters who would brook no disobedience. After they had been suitably cowed, he would leave the rest for whatever luckless fool was appointed occupation general of this ridiculous backwater planet.

He turned smugly back to his bridge crew, his very bearing speaking the superiority he felt over them, a feeling that went far beyond his rank.

"Join the scanning sweep of the planet," Decius ordered sharply. "Stay in sight of the other ships. Destroy any signs of civilization. When these barbarians return to pick the blackened bones of their cities, we'll be there, and these hopeless savages will find they'll have a new set of boots to be licking. Thus the Praetor adds another world to his glittering circlet," and his voice was sardonic and even mocking when he said those last few words, and more than one man on that bridge shuddered at their Commander's casual lack of respect. Fear caused many men throughout the eons to be the servitors, but in Decius his own ambition and egocentricity had long overshadowed that fear which made others merely stand

and wait. Decius had not met his match in cunning or guile... yet.

The huge ship cruised easily into the atmosphere, wings wide like an eagle soaring proudly over its' domain, monarch of all it surveyed. The brightly painted bird of prey adorning the ship's underside only added to the effect and left no doubts in the minds of those who witnessed this as to what the ship's purpose was. Destruction and subjugation were spelled out across the tempered metal just as surely as if they were emblazoned on the underside in letters a dozen feet tall. The past had caught up with the Luddites; their ancient transgressions had reared up to exact payment most cruel from the present generation and all generations to follow.

* * *

Ensign Jerome Bixby of the starship Enterprise lay bound and bloodied in a squalid hut. His uniform was torn and faded, not to mention patched here and there. In some cases the material almost matched. He looked like anything but officer material. Served him right, he supposed. He had been among the crewmembers who had voted not to return to the Enterprise when it set off on its mission to set time right again. After the way Kirk had bungled things in 1990 Chicago by first letting that temporal-tampering agent get away, and then letting Spock and McCoy get trapped in the old library when the flood came... it was just too much to forgive, wasn't it? He couldn't run off with him again, all the way to the other side of the galaxy, in the dim hope that it could all be set right again. This time the great Captain Kirk had really stuck his foot in it, and Spock and McCoy weren't around to help bail him out... nor were they likely to be.

But then what was he doing here? He screwed up, too, and got caught. Guess that showed him that no one was infallible. But, lord, Kirk screwed up on a cosmic level! He lost the Federation, Spock, McCoy and the whole damned universe all in one fell swoop! That had to deserve some kind of prize. And we gave him that prize, didn't we? We all ran out on him, leaving him alone on the Enterprise. A special deed deserves a special purgatory. Some of the others had finally reconsidered when the plan for saving everything had been suggested. Maybe fighting for a goal, no matter how seemingly hopeless it was, was better after all than puttering around on this caricature of the Earth he had known. What was he accomplishing here? At least Scotty and the others were working toward something they could see. All we've been doing is staying alive and trying to hide the truth about our settlement. What a great life!

Now here he was, Bixby, the Great White Hunter, captured by the Luddites while he was scavenging for game. Apparently some word had filtered into the surrounding communities after all. The remainder of the crew and the shattered remnants of High Harbor (although most of the High Harbor refugees were still coming cross-country to meet them. What were they getting into!) hadn't been as successful at keeping their community's scientific leanings as secret as they thought. He recalled with disgust the day they had been forced to murder a group of fishermen who had ventured too close at the wrong place and seen something that would have exposed their settlement as scioncers. They couldn't have risked that, he kept telling himself, or they would have been attacked as soon as the word had spread. Rebuilding science in a world that had rejected it as being one of the two roots of all evil was not a very safe occupation to indulge in. He remembered the description of the rout of High Harbor, the settlement a thousand miles away, and how fully half the population including over a hundred children, had been massacred. He smiled grimly when he thought of how the attack had finally been repulsed. Kirk again, forever trying to make up for his monumental blunder, using the transporter to move water from the river to the burning High Harbor library. A miracle the Luddites had called it, and then turned tail and run, but not before they had burned High Harbor's primitive version of a mission control space center. A rocket, cobbled together from debris gathered from space. God, how he wished he could have seen that! The ingenuity that must have taken, and by people who looked upon authority for its own sake the way Luddites looked at science! Luddites, now that was a funny name. Taken from a guy who called himself King Ludd, of the early days of the Industrial Revolution, who had fomented revolt against the factory bosses and promoted a return to the pre-mechanical days by smashing all machinery. Every era had its Looney Tunes, but this one was founded on it!

The door of his hovel bursting open brought Bixby's reverie and retrospect to a screeching halt. Two burly guards decked out in the latest in leathers and homespuns yanked him to his feet and led him outdoors. The sunlight made his eyes squint and burn after the dark confines of that windowless travesty. He was shoved into what looked like some sort of town square. The buildings were constructed from wood and stone and the whole place had a Middle Ages feel to it. People dressed in simple, drab attire were gathered all around. Some of them were pointing very servicable-looking blunderbusses at him, the kind the Pilgrims packed in old picture books on Thanksgiving. This seemed to have the makings of a public execution. He wouldn't be surprised.

The people in the crowd had been murmuring among themselves until finally a man strutted forward from the crowd, a large Bible tucked carefully under his arm. His leather breeches were worn like the others. Whoever he was, he didn't live any better than anyone else standing around here.

"I am this day's keeper of the word," he began. "We try to live our lives as the Lord intends. We don't tamper in those things which only He is meant to understand, and only He can use wisely in that realm beyond our own. But you and yours, Scienker-bastard, spawn of foul sorcery, would bring great catastrophe on us all over again."

"From the looks of things, you've already done a good job on yourselves."

The man turned toward the assemblage. "Fair souls, what say you to his words?"

"Smite him!" They roared back with energy and fervor. Bixby was slapped harshly across the face by his interrogator.

"The old ways are dead," the man rejoined, "and to attempt to resurrect them is the devil's work! Repent your sins before God and man so that you may journey to your creator with a clean soul, as journey you must! Acknowledge your Savior!"

"Save yer? What? What are you going on about? Look, I'm from this world in another timeline, and it's a good life, really. Why we..."

The man turned towards the crowd again. "Fair souls, what say you?"

Oh no, thought Bixby, not again.

"Smite him!" They shouted back eagerly.



Again the man struck Bixby heavily across the face with the back of his hand. I bet they're flaggellists, thought Bixby.

"We've heard tales of you people," continued the keeper of the world of the day, "and of your attempt to meddle with eternal time itself. The fate for such as you can only be a fiery one."

"I can't figure you out. Everything you have you built by hand, and yet even machines are built by hand, and they're meant to help people, when they're used by honest men."

"We use only what comes from the Lord."

"Where do you think your machines come from? The sky?"

The man turned towards the crowd again. "Fair souls," he began, but stopped when something caught his eye and riveted his attention as he gazed upward. His mouth dropped open in an 'oh' of surprise, which was quickly transformed into a shriek of terror.

"Deliver us, for this one has brought down the devil from the sky!"

Jerome felt the grip of the guards relax and he turned to see them staring upwards at the most horrifying thing he ever expected to see. A Romulan warship! It was gliding at tree-top level, and it was huge, so huge. The design painted on its underbelly told, as clearly as anything could, the intentions of such a craft. To these people, whose lives were filled with days and nights of relentless superstition, it must seem like retribution dropped hideously from the sky in an unimaginable form.

"Christ, a Romulan ship! And here of all places!" exclaimed Bixby, and terror was now his companion as well of all the people around him.

"You know this thing?" quailed the keeper of the day.

"It's doom. Real doom. Not the fantasy garbage you feed these people with to explain away their wretched lives, but real and solid doom! If there's a Hell, it's hanging there in the sky, and it's there because people like you refused to see that science can be misused just like anything else, but that it isn't evil of itself. To turn your back on it for all these decades has just been compounding the original mistake because for all this time you've been leaving yourself open to those who didn't reject science and used it for evil, while you could have used it for good and protected yourselves while improving the quality of your lives. Now it's too late for any of us."

"You lie!"

Bixby pointed at the ship. "Is that a lie? What you believed was the truth was just delusion and escape, but there's no escape anymore. Once they land, you can forget about being free of anything. If you're real lucky, they might make you keeper of the slaves for a day!"

"No, no, we can't be wrong. God will deliver us. We have led just and honorable lives. We will be protected from His enemies." The man didn't want to believe what Bixby was saying, but that metal demon kept hovering there in the sky, blotting out any other reality.

"Science lives, whether you like it or not."

A woman ran from the crowd and knelt in the dirt at Bixby's feet. "Sciencer, we were wrong, I know it, I've always known it. Save us, please!"

"I can't save you! Only you could have done that, but it's years too late now."

The keeper looked as if he was about to strike the woman, but then the Romulan ship started humming and he started

quivering. Their prisoner couldn't be right. The Sciencers couldn't be right. Could they?

Everyone was staring upwards in helpless amazement, and Bixby couldn't blame them. He had never seen a Romulan ship other than on viewing screen tapes. The encounters with them that the Enterprise had engaged in were before he was assigned. But even they had never seen one this close, or in broad daylight without the vastness of space to distort the prospective and the overpowering majesty of this thing. It was incredible, gigantic, and it had come an impossible distance just to crush this planet and grip it like a vice. How many more of them were there? Was it just a scout, checking out a primitive world for the invasion fleet? He hoped that was all it was, but would it have been so obvious if it were just sizing up the neighborhood?

People started crying and falling to their knees. They shouted for deliverance and protection, explaining that they had led good, clean science-free lives. Some thrashed and threw themselves around on the ground, long drawn out mewling sounds issuing animal like from their throats. The keeper buried his face in his dogeared Bible and began to weep.

The Romulan battle-cruiser loomed over the trees like a sprawling canopy of metal glistening dangerously in the sun. Suddenly beams lanced out from it, vaporizing the trees in a huge area beneath it. It was going to land! Now!

That's it, I don't need any more nudging, thought Bixby, and he turned and sprinted for the protective cover of the thick forest at the other end of the village.

That was when he heard the screams from behind him. He turned and looked back while still running, and saw that the ponderous battle cruiser had settled to the ground on long stalk-like legs which appeared from its underside like the stretching talons of some monstrous hawk. Men in red and gold armored suits descended to the ground, and from their hands came small flashes which struck down the people whether they were fleeing or just standing around in slack-jawed amazement. Houses exploded into rubble, catching people with the shards of stone and wood while they ran. Bixby saw a hail of wood impale the Keeper against the side of a building where he hung suspended above the ground.

Bixby was almost to the forest when an enveloping flash transported him into unconsciousness.

* * *

A low humming drifted into his subconscious and caused him to stir and waken. He looked around and found he was in some sort of holding area, apparently on board the Romulan vessel. The room was sparsely furnished, being mostly bare metal and only the minimum of conveniences required. So now he was inside a Romulan ship!

Apparently his waking had been monitored because almost immediately the door swished open and a Romulan officer entered, accompanied by two armed guards.

Well, thought Bixby, here we go again.

Jake Williams ran blindly through the night shrouded countryside, while over the hill, in his wake, came the sound of searing thunder which was blistering the landscape and annihilating anything that moved. He was always being burned out of his home, at least lately. First High Harbor had been attacked by the Luddites and he had been transported, with a few others, via the Enterprise's remarkable beam, down to this encampment which the remaining Enterprise crew had built. Now this camp was being burned out by what he was told were Romulans. That was about all he was able to learn before they were attacked. After grabbing a few things which he could carry while running for their lives, the camp had dispersed into the darkness. He had seen the looks of fear pass across the Enterprise people at the mention of Romulans, and he had no intention of sticking around to find out what Romulans were like in person.

Everything they had strived for, the civilization they had hoped to rebuild, was being reduced to ashes by an invader whose existence would have been unthinkable to them just a few months ago.

But at least there had been a warning. He knew that the Enterprise had gone into radio silence in making its cloaked escape, but the Cannibal Wheel had kept on transmitting, radioing back the description of the invaders, and that their numbers had been unbelievable. Never mind the fact of their existence.

So much had happened. So much! First the discovery of Kirk and the Enterprise and his tale of another time line, one where everything they were fighting for had existed for hundreds of years. And now the Romulans. Kirk had warned them about the existence of some armed aggressor, but how could they ever have imagined something like this? The description they'd had of the Enterprise was incredible enough. The Romulans may have come in their giant metal war-birds to roost on the remains of a plundered world, but they would find their occupation an uneasy one at best, because they had received that warning. There had been time to hide some of the things they could use, including the radio. Time to gather precious things and run before the flames baked and cleansed what they called civilization. Plans made to disperse and head for the mountains and the caves which had been discovered by some of the Enterprise people some distance away. They could regroup and direct the rest of the High Harbor refugees there who were coming down through Lake Erie to Ohio and beyond. It would be more rugged and dangerous than they had expected, but they would not knuckle under. Maybe they wouldn't be able to turn the tide, but they could at least undermine their conquerors' saugness. He touched his belt and felt the firm cold hardness of metal nestled there, and was more at ease. Someone would pay for this day.

Jake stumbled through the darkness, his breath rasping through his thick beard. He slipped into a dark gully and lay very still, getting his wind while he plotted and planned for what tomorrow would bring to the ragged band of survivors of this night of fire and death.

In the distance, Decius' war-bird, the Raptorian, hung in the sky above the ruined encampment, the glow of the massive fires on the ground below illuminating the underside so that it shown in the darkness like a demon come to haunt a struggling world.

The rout of the world took the Romulans six days, and on the seventh they feasted. Their conquest consisted of systemically destroying all population centers so that the humans would be left homeless and helpless. Many were captured as slaves, just as Bixby had predicted. It was impossible to ferret out and capture all the humans on the planet, but they were still able to make certain that the Romulan presence was known and felt. No place in the open was safe now, and people were forced to move by night and set up their communities in caves and to dig networks of tunnels to allow them to move by day. Where life before had been hard, it now became miserable and excruciating. The Romulans established new townships which were built under their harsh supervision so that they could arrange for the mining of this planet's rich resources. They found puzzling evidence that mining had taken place on this planet once before, hundreds of years ago, but that it had all been inexplicably abandoned. What was even more amazing were the rusted hulks of ancient machines they found deep in the old tunnels. What a strange and contradictory world this was.

Still scattered resistance remained, even among the prisoners! Somehow these people had acquired a bizarre aversion to servitude, and in fact violently opposed the concept of being told what to do. Had this planet never known government or authority to condition the people to accept the word of someone more powerful than they? The evidence seemed to say not. Those who have not been ruled by anyone in their lifetimes don't tend to know how to be ruled by anyone. Only people from communities founded on the precepts of some ancient religion were found to be more pliable than the rest. Since these people had followed the precepts of a belief that was no more than an unproven theory cast about for hundreds of years, they were more used to obeying blindly and not questioning the why and the wherefore. Still, the Romulans found this world to be a vast headache, and lessons and examples of why their orders should be obeyed were frequently imposed. Bending wills that would rather break than bend was an unusual task, but the Romulan's harsh natures were more than up to it. Some more than others, though.

Decius' scorched earth policy was not the rule among the invasionary forces, despite their problems, although it was agreed that somebody had to set examples and affirm superiority to the natives. Only the most blood-thirsty ship captains volunteered for this senseless carnage, for this was destruction for its own sake against a foe who, compared to the Romulans' superior forces, was merely helpless on his worst. Decius loved it. He reveled in the carnage, rejoiced in the suffering and wallowed in the misery of the conquered minions. When gazing at his screens, bathed in the glow of a fiery decimation, he would laugh with sadistic glee as the inferno danced before him. His officers and crew had long since tired of this waste of time and energy. This wasn't combat, it was savagery and murder, and there was no honor in crushing a foe who could not fight back except with sticks and stones and primitive gunpowder weapons which were wont to blow up in the user's face, as to propel their feeble missile at a target.

The seventh day on this planet found the Raptorian resting outside the smoking remains of some nameless Luddite township, and Decius proudly inspecting his handiwork.

"What a putrid planet this had turned out to be. Hardly even worth the trouble to subjugate," he sneered. "I'll be grateful when we can move on to richer pickings."

The transponder on his belt beeped as if on cue. He snapped it up with a flourish. "Commander Decius here."

"Sir, there is a communication for you from the fleet commander," the metallic voice of the communications link intoned. "Do you wish it transferred or will you take it in your quarters?"

"I'll return to the ship and take it there," And keep the old has-been waiting, he added to himself. "Decius out."

He entered his private quarters alone and snapped the door lock behind him. He removed his burnished helmet and relaxed before signaling his readiness. The worn face of the fleet commander appeared before him on his private communications screen. The commander saluted Decius and he replied in kind. That tired relic's position should be mine, Decius raged to himself, and were I given better planets to plunder I would show that I deserve the command of the Praetor's flagship. Decius had been offered the choice of serving on the flagship as an officer, or command his own vessel, and he had chosen the latter. Any command was better than subservience.

"Decius," the Commander began, "I have spent much time giving the matter consideration and I have decided to promote you for your actions on our recent military engagement."

Decius brightened perceptibly and almost laughed out loud. Promoted to where? Was the old bastard going to retire along with that feeble lot of a centurion he kept around gathering dust?

"I am most honored, my commander," Decius replied. For once he almost like the aging warhorse.

"I am pleased to hear your enthusiasm, as I am placing you in charge of all the occupation forces on this planet."

"Decius almost screamed out. The blood drained from his face with plummeting speed and efficiency. For a full minute his heartbeat was erratic and his blood pressure spiraled upward. One instant he felt hot, and the next terribly cold. He stood frozen in position, his mouth hanging open, unknowingly presenting a comical front to the screen which assured the commander his decision had been more than inspiration, it had been sheer genius. Perhaps a year or two of ground duty would drain some of the arrogance from this ignorant pup.

"I see that you are overcome by the moment, so I will leave you to tend to your affairs and put things in order for your new command." The screen went quietly dark.

"NEW COMMAND!!! NEW COMMAND!!! EEYYYAGGGHHH!!!" the Romulan screamed, raging at the four walls. He leaped forward, grabbed the video mechanism, yanked it free with a scrape and a scream of tortured metal, turned and hauled it against the opposite wall. It exploded in a shower of electronic fragments. Through some maniacal quirk of fate, none of them struck him.

He stood in the center of the room, panting and seething, looking for something to strangle.

Several minutes later he appeared on the bridge of his warship, resplendent in his glistening metallic uniform.

"Since I am to be put in charge of this planet, for my first official act I want the countryside leveled for twenty miles around to insure that any subversive planetary forces nearby are expunged before my headquarters is constructed."

The bridge crew received the orders impassively, as if it was a small thing that their rapacious commander was being shackled to a planet he had expressed open disgust for. The crew's iron control of their reactions was stretched to its utmost in that moment, for they knew that if any laughed at this cosmic jest, their slaughter would result.

Decius turned stiffly and strode off the bridge, not even waiting to view the results of his order. It didn't matter anymore. He could lay waste to this entire ball of backward dirt, and he'd still be in charge of it. But if he had to live here, he would most certainly make it over to his liking. They were near the eastern seaboard of this wretched continent. What he had in mind would be a fitting tribute to his skills and imagination.

In the hills which rolled up into mountains far to Decius' north, yet still on the fringes of an area once beloved by a certain ship's doctor, a growing band of refugees had set up its headquarters. Caves had been painstakingly explored and artificially united through the tireless labors of men driven by thoughts of revenge and retribution. People who had once reveled in the sunlight and open wilderness, were now forced to live in the dank regions offered them by caverns both large and small.

Jake Williams and some other men were gathered in one such cavern deep underground. It was lit only by flickering torches secured in notches in the old stone walls. This was their brain center. Here was collected all scraps of information in hopes of gathering leads on the Romulan activities both large and small.

"How is the refugee situation?" Jake inquired of a man sitting next to him on a rude wooden bench. The man had once been a bit portly, but these new times did not allow for excess of anything, except caution.

"Our agents are finding more day by day. I was told that a group of twenty came straggling in early this morning. That boosts our population to three hundred. Even with the food we took from the ravaged farms and cultivation we do by night, we are barely holding our own. We're going to have to concentrate more on setting up a stronger line of provisions and less on finding more hungry to feed, at last for awhile."

"I'm afraid you're right," said a young woman from across the table, "but we may be able to do both. A new township is just being finished by the Romulans on the coast south of here, and it's just a few days' march. Some of our agents are part of the slave labor force. They can slip in and out with ease. The Romulans only keep track of numbers, not faces, and so our agents take turns. Next week it's my turn. Some of the food the farm communes are growing there will be secretly diverted to us. But it will still be difficult when winter comes."

"How are our relations with the other slaves there? Don't they resent not being a part of this commune?" Jake wondered.

"Yes and no," she replied. "They know that we live free here, but they also know that our food situation is perilous. Some still drift over to us anyway, but if we could lick the food problem, the Romulans there would wake up tomorrow and find their slave pens deserted. There is a major problem with the people there, though. The commander of the Romulan force on this planet has his base there, and his appetites have changed from ravaging the land to ravaging the women, and when he's through with them he doesn't give them back. They're just taken up to his castle, or whatever that place is, and they're never heard from again. It's hoped that they're being held prisoner there, but some of the field agents report evidence to the contrary."

"If only we could attack them," the man observed.

"With their weapons?" Jake replied. "We have some things here we could use against them, but an open attack would just bring other ships and we'd be flattened in minutes. No, what I propose is something more effective. A strike which will show that we aren't as helpless and hopeless as we seem. One that will demonstrate to the slaves in that township that we have strength, and that they can count on us as long as we can count on them. Something which will also help convince the Romulans that we're more trouble than this planet is worth to them."

Decius looked out over the devastated wasteland to the ocean beyond. His headquarters was already under construction overlooking the rolling blue waters which crashed thunderously against the rocky cliffs far below. He would make the best of this wretched situation and he would rise above it, despite the vermin who had stranded him here. Perhaps stranded wasn't entirely accurate since he still had the Raptorian and a couple other ships based around the planet, but to an upwardly mobile personality like Decius, it was torture to just wait, sitting here perched and ready to spring into the grip of the heavens on another more glorious campaign. He would overcome and he would command that flagship yet.

"I'll live to dance on your grave, you senile son-of-a-bitch!" And he shook his fist at the sky to punctuate his proclamation.

No one else was around to hear his vow of vengeance, which was just as well. He communicated infrequently with his crew as they had begun complaining of ailments from the food and water, and the bites of bothersome flies. Insects! He was troubled with complaints about insects and dysentery! A warrior, and he was plagued with nonsense like this! In a shrill and threatening tone, he had instructed his men to not bother him with such complaints again. "Get a fly swatter and keep your dysentery to yourself!" he had commanded them. They knew better than to raise the subject again. Thus his crew was finding their shore duty less restful than they had anticipated.

Jerome Bixby had passed through some strange and trying weeks. He had been intermittently interrogated by the hauntingly beautiful female Romulan commander of this vessel, and had been informed that he was now based far from where he had been captured. He'd gotten awful good at getting captured lately, but it wasn't something he wished to congratulate himself about.

He remembered the discussions about the duplicates which were to be found in this altered timeline, and he realized that somehow out there his doppelganger might still be alive, but he hadn't been ready to meet people that he knew of in the normal continuity of time. The computer in the Enterprise was packed to overflowing on the sultry Romulan commander, Thea, who had been a dupe in the scheme to secure the cloaking device. But to actually meet her, and her having no idea who he was or what he represented... it was all too much. As it was, she knew there was something peculiar about him because he didn't respond to her with fear out of ignorance the way the other natives did. In him she recognized a response that came out of frightened familiarity, as if he were meeting an old enemy, and she was visibly bothered by this. He knew exactly how she felt!

To prevent himself from being mindprobed, and his then useless carcass tossed aside, he had concocted a story guaranteed to both fascinate and unnerve them. Hopefully they would remain so fascinated with his mind as his spooky knowledge of them, that they'd keep him around.

Thea came to visit him again. Her visits were always the same. It was her mask of indifference versus his, and neither was real. It was a game they played. She knew she had the upper hand, yet she never felt completely in control around this one. He knew things he shouldn't, and looked at her with eyes that possessed incredible secrets.

"How is it again that we are not unfamiliar to you?" she began, probing for perhaps a new answer to this nagging question.

"In my dreams I have seen you, in your ships of the sky, and on a world that has a brother circling a star far from here."

"Do many people have these dreams?" she pressed.

"There have always been a few, but there are seldom many that live at the same time. I possess a gift that was handed down through the years."

"If you knew of us and our coming in your dreams, why were you not ready for us?"

"Most people on this world reject the teachings of science. I can be a prophet of doom, but I cannot forestall events if the plans to do so would be a violation of everything that is held sacred here."

"What else did you foresee?"

"I saw your arrival... and your departure."

She jumped at that. This was a new wrinkle he had come up with to throw in and keep her off balance.

"What do you mean, our departure? This planet is now a possession of the Praetor forever and always."

"Perhaps so, but you will not always be around to secure it. I see... a man who walks in your garb, who commands even you to stand at attention, and I see that he plots to control this world for himself by destroying all around him who do not share in his dream."

Her eyes widened. "Do you mean Decius, the governor of the occupation?"

"That may be his name. I see only images and events."

"This is all very interesting, and may just be a fascinating skein of lies. I find it difficult to believe that even a madman like Decius would desire a throne on this of all worlds."

"If he be truly mad, would it matter to him which world he ruled?"

She gazed at him with something hovering between distrust and fear, and then left. The door whooshed shut behind her with a fatalistic click.

So another session had passed. How long would she keep him around to question? Would she grow tired of the amusement or wary of his words? He didn't think this cat-and-mouse deception would last much longer before he joined many others in the slave pens, or worse.

Decius was gazing out to sea when the communicator link sounded.

"Commander Decius, it's Sub-Commander Thea of the western region."

"Put her through," he replied with bored disdain.

Thea's face spiraled to life in the center of his desk screen. "Commander, I have been interviewing the Terran seer again."

"The one who somehow knows who we are?"

"Yes. Today he not only described our binary planet system... but he also accused you of coveting this planet for yourself."

Decius exploded with derisive laughter. "And just how was I going to take possession of this glittering jewel from the forces of the Praetor?"

"He said that he foresaw your killing all the rest of us."

"The only reason I would kill the rest of you would be so that I could escape from the miserable clod of dirt, and that would hardly serve my long-term goals, now would it? I'm a warrior, not a pirate. He's playing some sort of game. Trying to divide us and get us at each other's throats. It's an old trick. Quaint, but old."

"There remains his visions, and the things he couldn't possibly know, that he sees in his mind."

"I believe neither in visions, nor in men with minds. It's all some sort of charade. Find out what sort and use whatever methods are necessary, including the Mindsifter. We won't need him when you're through anyway."

"Yes, Commander." Thea's image faded out and Decius leaned back in his chair with a long drawn out sigh.

"I so wish this world could offer me some interesting sport."

* * *

The long thin beach was just a winding thread of darkness under the moonless night sky. Along it crept Jake Williams. He had made his way down to the beach at a point many miles north so that he would reach this point after nightfall. He moved silently, hugging the cliff face, ever alert for any telltale noise or movement. Up ahead, barely a mile distant, a strange shape squatted on the summit of the cliff, an alien design which housed an unhappy alien visitor.

He was walking carefully along when he spotted something pale in the shadows. He approached cautiously. It was the body of a girl. She couldn't have been more than fifteen, and she was naked. Jake knelt down to check her pulse and see if she might still be alive when he heard stones sliding from behind him. He whirled and saw the familiar pattern of a Romulan helmet and uniform. His movement was a blur as he made his leap a part of the same movement with his turn. With a Romulan, there was no time for questions. Jake hit him hard and they went down, but as they did he heard something whisper out of a sheath while he was struggling to reach his knife in his boot. Pain exploded in his side with piercing force. Jake reached down and pushed away the knife which had caught him too quickly while he and the Romulan fought for supremacy on that deserted beach under the stars, with the only spectator staring at them with cold dead eyes. Jake's fingers locked around the alien's throat and his thumb pressed inward, crushing the windpipe. The minutes seemed to drag by unmercifully, but finally all struggles ceased. He used the Romulan's own knife to finish the job. Now, before he lost too much blood, he had his own job to finish. He stumbled away, seething with rage and hatred, steeling himself for the ordeal that lay ahead.

* * *

The occupation headquarters of Decius, formerly of the Romulan battle fleet, was an exercise in ostentation designed to flaunt his hatred of his position and his desire to make the most of it. The building was patterned after the summer palace of the Praetor, constructed with the labors of the local slaves under the expert guidance of his officers. The locals had been given whatever harmless powered tools and equipment they needed to work, but each worker with a tool was kept under careful guard, and all equipment was stored in the ship at dusk. Still, there had been incidents.

Whether from ignorance or sabotage, strategic segments of the structure would sometimes collapse with annoying suddenness, and only when they were being used by Romulans. When these problems had been seemingly solved and the structure had been completed, the stairway in front had collapsed when Decius was preparing to inspect the interior. By this time, Decius had wised up. He divined the truth and, after flogging a few dozen slaves, a task he relished and carried out himself, the stairs were rebuilt without incident. He had made it clear that should the stairs, or any other part of the structure, take upon itself to mysteriously cease to be, that all of the workers would be pitched summarily over the high cliff which Decius had used his ship to cut into the coastline. It was after this that even the meager conditions at the caves in the north seemed good, and workers started deserting the township with alarming regularity. The Romulan's were forced to beef up their security in the township which, until then, had begun to be relaxed due to the stability of things. To accomplish this, several guards were removed from the palace interior.

Even with the Romulans' advanced methods of construction, it had taken two score days to build the structure (damnable slaves), while Decius observed contentedly from his cabin aboard the Raptorian. He had replaced the transponder.

There had been murmurs of surprise, and even fear, from his crew when he described what he wanted, but he had quieted them by explaining that should the Praetor ever visit this world (fat chance) that there should be accommodations befitting him. The fact that if the Praetor had ever decided to visit, that his plans would have been forwarded months in advance so just a building could be erected, never came up in the conversations.

Decius' officers conversed with him as little as possible these days, for a dark and dangerous mood had descended on him ever since he had been assigned to this station. The men themselves were getting to quarreling among themselves, what with the problems with the food, water and pests, but they always did it out of earshot of Decius.

The balcony which Decius occupied at this moment overlooked the ocean. It was the only pleasure he derived from this wretched planet. Well, almost the only one. On a moonless night like this, lying out here with the salt spray washing over his terrace on the evening breeze was a delicious experience. On the nights when he had wenches from the nearby township brought to him, it was here, on the imitation marble and stucco, that he would wrestle them into submission and achieve his temporary release from the strain of command. It was also from here that he would pitch their writhing forms afterward and watch the swirling waters swallow them to cleanse him of their sullied existence. That was the climatic moment he enjoyed

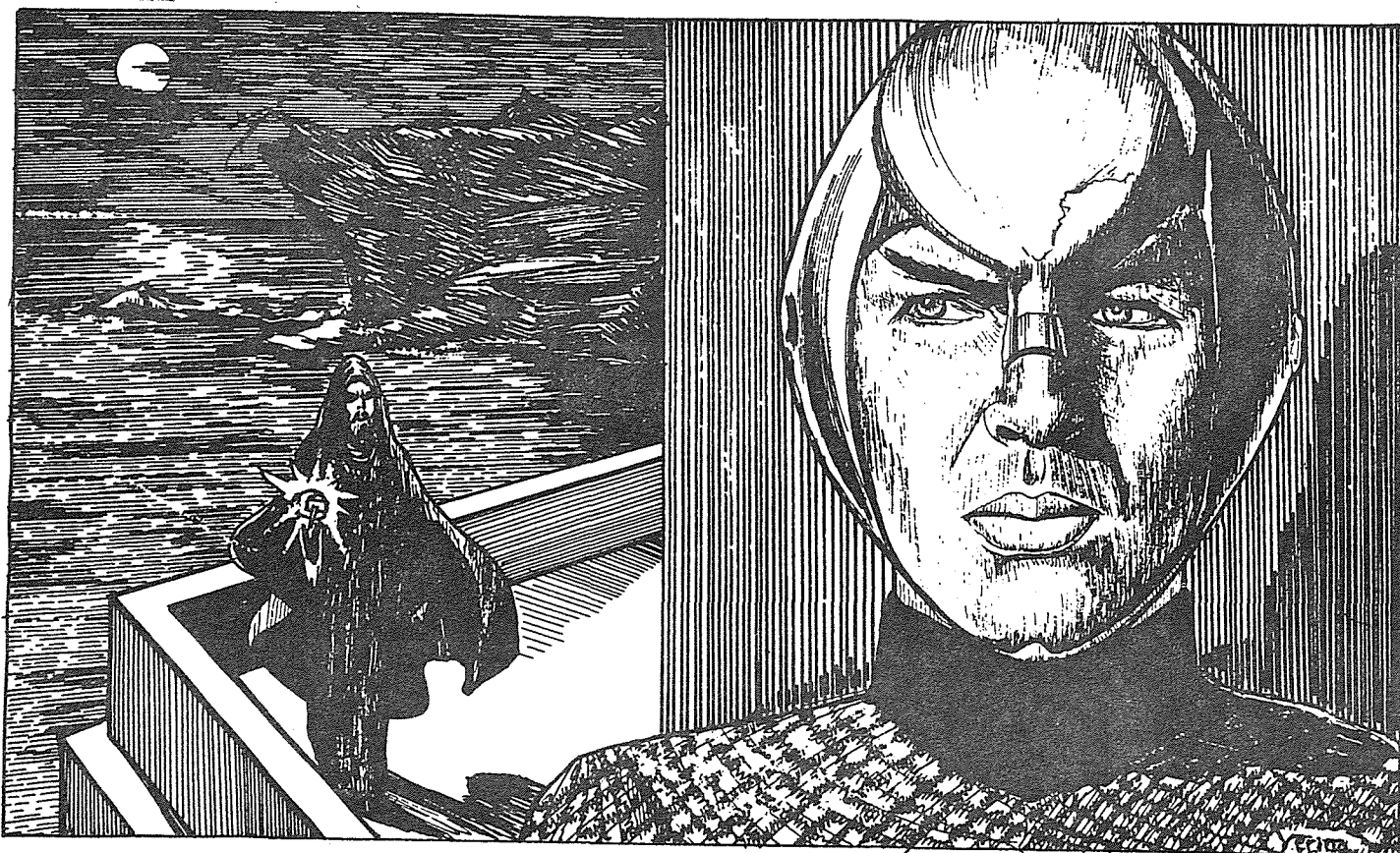
the most. Still, there were were times when he was denied his relief, such as tonight for instance. He had secured the comliest wench in the town, of that he was sure. Such a lovely virgin she had been, lithe of limb with golden hair and dark piercing eyes. He might have even kept that one around for a few days. But after disrobing her, she had spoiled everything by savagely clawing his face and hurling herself off the balcony. He didn't even see to get her land. He hoped she hadn't swum off the way a couple of others had managed to. That was so annoying when they lived. To make sure, he had sent one of his guards down to the beach to investigate and retrieve her, if at all possible. If they're not too cold and not too old, that was his criterion.

He was anticipating the possibilities of that when he heard a noise. What the devil was that? It was a scrape, and... a sigh? Decius looked around, trying to place the location of the enigmatic sound when a movement at the northern end of the balcony caught his attention. There was a form rising over the railing, and for one fearful gibbering moment he had the horrible idea that one of the wenches he had used, come back to haunt him, draped in rotting seaweed, her fingernails broken and bloodied, skin lacerated and raw from the long climb upward from the unforgiving rocks below. But that was patently impossible! His guilt and fear drained from him almost as quickly as they had appeared, but in that handful of seconds, in that moment of stunned surprise, the warrior had succumbed to the man, and fate had turned its face away from him once more.

Decius strode briefly forward but was brought up short by an evil, knowing laugh. The voice that spoke was gruff and weak from exertion, and yet it contained a chilling note of triumph.

"You pointy-eared bastard. I knew you'd be here after you had that girl brought up to you today. We've known for a long time what you did with them, and where they wound up. I found her body on the beach."

The Romulan started to lunge but halted when he saw a weapon of some kind in the man's hand. It was a strange device, with a short glistening glassine nose and a solid machined body which was sleek and elegant looking. Only a warrior would find a weapon elegant, but Decius could see the grace and artistry in the weapon's design, and he could also see that it came from a culture far more advanced than the one which groveled in the dirt on this forsaken rock.



Jake felt as if he were dying of exhaustion. The knife wound in his side contributed largely to that, he knew. It had taken him longer to scale the cliff because of that, even with the tolls and hooks he used, and he had almost fallen twice. But he had driven himself on, to his appointed destination. He stood straight, his breath wheezing heavily through his tangled, matted beard. If the light out here were any better, the Romulan would have seen what bad shape he was in, and might even have chanced a lunge that would have worked. But despite everything, all the luck was with Jake tonight, and none of it with Decius.

Decius' mind raced. He didn't dare cry out or this fool would shoot him for sure. The people on this planet must all be out of their minds. They didn't know when to give up. Imagine, climbing all the way up that cliff just because of a few worthless wenches. He licked his lips and looked around, trying desperately to think of something he could do that would work.

"You're a fool," he began. "You can't hope to escape from here no matter what you do to me. And where did you ever get a thing like that, that gun?"

"I got this from some friends. Most of 'em are dead, now, but some of 'em aren't, and they left in a ship bigger'n yours before you landed." Jake turned a dial on the weapon's aft until it clicked all the way over in one direction. "And one other thing. I'm not worried about escapin'."

Jake Williams held the phaser tightly in his hand as the hum it was emitting grew into a treacherous whine which suddenly ended in a flash of oblivion.

The sudden burst of light was visible for miles, reflecting off the wine-dark depths like a briefly rising sun. The crash and destruction that resulted in the pseudo-palace brought guards running from every direction. They didn't find much. All of the wing that contained Decius' sleeping chambers was a yawning crevice which opened onto the rolling, frigid waters of an ocean whose name Decius had never bothered to find out.

* * *

Jerome Bixby awoke with a start. He had been dreaming... no, these were more than dreams. They had to do with the Enterprise, and he saw Kirk and a bunch of scurfy Anarchists standing outside the glowing arch of the Guardian of Forever. It didn't make any sense except that he knew they were planning to enter. Could it be true? And if it was, then...

The door to his cell opened, and it was the Romulan Commander, Thea, again, but this time her eyes were fiery with anger.

"Decius is dead. I don't know how, because he was surrounded by guards, but something is going on on this planet and you're going to tell me what it is."

"Decius... is dead? Hey, that's news to me, and I'm the one with the dreams!"

"I've heard enough about your dreams. I'm going to implement Decius' final order to me and put you under the Mindsifter. I'd been delaying and trying to find an alternative, but with Decius gone, I'm in command now, and I don't intend to meet the same fate he did. You'll just be a vegetable when the Sifter is finished with you, but I'll finally know the truth about everything. Now let's go!"

Thea was frantic. She had delayed following Decius' order because his story fascinated her, but after he was killed by who-knows-what, she must have flipped. She's afraid she might be next and she wants to know what's going on. Bixby eyed the weapon in her hand uncomfortably. It was small, deadly and agonizingly efficient. He had seen it described in the Enterprise computer library. But the Mindsifter, too! They must have captured that from the Klingons. If they used it on him they'd know everything. But would they believe it? With everything else he knew, they'd be terrified not to! If they believed it was possible to alter a timeline, what would they do? They'd hunt down and destroy the Enterprise. Right now Kirk had a chance because the Romulan's couldn't even imagine such a thing as Kirk's big screw-up in the continuum, but if they even suspected the truth of what might be ready to happen at the Guardian... he knew he had to get away from here, one way or another.

Bixby threw himself forward. Without thinking, Thea fired. The bolt tore into him and enveloped his body in a thin energy sheen, peeling away his existence, but then something happened. Thea wavered in front of him and vanished. Suddenly, he felt himself fall. Not physically, all physical sensations had vanished, but mentally he swam through a maelstrom of memories and feelings. One moment he would be gripped with instant cold, and the next he would feel like he was alone in the pit of the universe. He saw things, but not with his eyes; with his mind. It was like clambering up from the bottomless well of a dream, except that his direction was constantly changing. A cloud seemed to settle on him, pushing him back, pressing him down, folding him up, drawing him together.

* * *

He woke up screaming in his bunk on the Enterprise.

"Jesus Christ!" And he meant it, too. It was real! He was really there! And yet he had been on board a Romulan ship on a primitive altered version of Earth as well. How could both be real? It was crazy! He was losing his grip! You can't die in one reality and wake up in another, it just doesn't happen that way! Wait, wait, wait, is this what death is, DYING IN ONE REALITY AND WAKING UP IN ANOTHER? Then why would I remember it? Why would I be sure the other was just as real? Why wasn't I just reborn in this other place? How could I be back where I was before the other reality happened, when I was in this reality first and then in the other one and now back again? It was all too much, too fast!

He stumbled off his bunk, through the swishing door and into the corridor. It was the Enterprise, no doubt about it. He ran down the hall and entered the turbolift. The lights marking its passage through the ship flashed by. Wait, where was he going? He had just yanked the lever without telling the computer anything.

"Oh, Hell" and he slid down into the corner of the lift and collapsed.



* * *

"Bixby, you in there?" drawled the voice outside his head.

He opened his eyes. It was Dr. McCoy he saw standing over him.

"Oh Jesus, thank God, thank God, I'd thought I'd wake up and be back with the Romulans again."

"Whoa now, hold on there. Romulans?"

He sighed and wiped his head. His hand was shaking, but from relief, not fear.

"This is gonna' sound crazy, Doc, but I swear I was on Earth, a prisoner of the Romulans, and then... I think I died and woke up back here."

Dr. McCoy frowned. This was the most extreme case he'd encountered. Other crewmembers, himself included, had troublesome dreams of an alternate existence which seemed terribly real, but nothing like this. Kirk and the others had filled him on the incredible story, and even though he didn't want to believe it, there were those computer tapes their other selves had made before they'd gone through the Guardian to fix things up. He'd gone through all of them, and they scared the living Hell out of him. That such a thing was possible... it was clear, now, that Starfleet would tighten its regulations on time travel considerably and might even ban it all together except in extreme circumstances. No more easygoing jaunts down the time stream now, because it had been proven that time wasn't a constant, and that it could be tampered with.

"No, Bixby, you're not crazy. Such a thing is possible. Try to relax. If you can't, I'll give you a shot."

"I'll try, Doc. This is all so incredible."

"More incredible than you might think. I have some tapes for you to go through. They might make you feel better. Then again, they might not."

Hours, hours, hours had passed pouring over tapes and records. Now Bixby knew the whole truth. He had abandoned Kirk, left him to fend for himself, to overcome incredible odds with only a partial crew and a rugged band of Anarchists to try and right the wrong. Tears streamed down his cheeks. Because he made a mistake? Because someone else had done something hopelessly crazy which Kirk never could have imagined in his wildest dreams as being remotely possible for a rational mind? But now he was back. Everything was the way it had been. In this time line, the right time line, he had never abandoned Kirk, because Kirk hadn't made the mistake. He had been warned in a screaming paradox to end all paradoxes in which he had met himself on that day in ancient Chicago. If he thought he was having identity problems, what was Kirk going through? From what the tapes had indicated, Kirk's two selves had merged in the Guardian, but the mental union had not been entirely successful, and they were still trying to correct this. What an incredible mess!

Bixby sighed and pushed himself away from the table. We've all been given another chance. I made a mistake. I ran out on Kirk, but that was in another life. That Bixby is dead, shot down by a Romulan. He grimaced at the thought.

Kirk needed his support now, and he wasn't going to run out on him again. He was tired, terribly tired. He wanted to see Kirk, though. He wanted to apologize. Maybe he could help. Maybe this time he could do things right.

Sitting there, piecing it all together, he thought about the Romulans. In that other life, they had killed him, but he had gotten his vengeance even if they'll never know. Because of his seemingly rash act, because Thea had killed him instead of keeping him alive at all costs, he had done his part to rob the Romulans of a galaxy they'll never even know they had.

INVADERS GREAT AND SMALL

by Leslie Fish, Joanne Agostino, and James Van Hise

The first eight and one-half pages of this story are entirely by Leslie Fish with only a few sentences here and there by me. The last four and one-half pages were written by me based on a brief synopsis provided by Leslie. Leslie then doubled the length of what I had written by expanding scenes here and there. The medical expertise in the story was provided by Joanne Agostino.

"If you visit American city,
You will find it very pretty.
Just two things of which you must beware:
Don't drink the water and don't breathe
the air."

The first that Doc McCoy knew of the invasion was when Jabe Beasley came galloping up the street bareback, on his lathered Sunday-go-to-Meetin' carriage horse. Jabe was bareheaded, wide-eyed, open-mouthed and hoarse, yelling: "To arms! To arms! The Space-devils are coming!" He didn't look as if he were joking, or drunk, or feverish. He looked scared to death. *Either he's plumb crazy or it's true*, McCoy judged, getting up so quickly that he almost tipped over the rocking chair.

"Jabe!" he bellowed, "Jabe, wait up! What's that you say?"

"Invaders!" Jabe gasped, reining in his wheezing horse. "Devils from space! Jes' like it was 200 years ago, only worse! Big, armored, pointy-eared devil-men -- ain't nothin' human about 'em -- they flew over Table Mountain in a big flyin' machine, less'n an hour ago! They landed in Miz Robinson's west forty, and they're marchin' on the town. Run fetch your rifle! They're comin' this way! To arms!"

"Hold on a minute. How do you know all this? Who saw them? You know how rumors can fly." Doc McCoy had no patience for rumors, gossip and hearsay evidence, as he'd said many times. "How do you know any of this is true?"

"I heard it from Miz Robinson herself, and I ain't got time to argue with you," Jabe snapped, his usual patience completely gone. "Git your rifle an' hurry down to the Meetin'-House! We need every hand we can get!"

"I haven't even fired a rifle in years."...and I'm sure not going anywhere 'til I know if it's true. "I'm a doctor, not a soldier."

"Then get ready ta do a helluva lotta doctorin', dammit! I got no time to sit here an' argue!" Jabe kicked his horse forward and galloped on down the street, yelling his latter-day Paul Revere message at every door he passed.

McCoy watched the dust settle, shook his head, and sat back down in the rocker. *Hoax*, he thought. *Some all-blown-up story. What would any space-men want with a one-horse town like Deacon's Crossing, Georgia, anyway?*

An hour later he heard the Meeting-House bell ringing as if for a fire. A little apprehensive, he went into his surgery and made sure the equipment was ready for emergencies.

While the McCoy's were eating dinner on the veranda, they heard the first of the gunfire. The firing kept up most of the night, and the whole family slept badly. Doc McCoy was torn between going out to try and join in the fray (because *somebody* was attacking) or to

stay here to minister to the wounded because he was the only doctor around for miles. His conscience struggled with his responsibilities as a doctor, and those of a citizen. He had never been able to justify a doctor shooting people when his calling was to bring aid and comfort, although he knew that if the battle came to his door, that he would fight without hesitation to protect his family. It was a question he found impossible to resolve adequately. This time he choose to wait, and not to fight. At least not yet.

At dawn, the wounded began arriving.

By nine A.M., Doc McCoy had ceased to doubt that the Space-Devils had arrived; the wounds he'd been treating all morning convinced him beyond any question. There were too many arms and legs that ended in spongy stumps where the flesh simply faded out to necrotic rags, then threads, then nothing: too many long-known neighbors shocked dumb or groaning in pain or crying hysterically over dead friends, lovers and relatives. Too many unknown faces from surrounding towns raved wildly about buildings dissolved by beams of strange light, and too many casualties piled up on the veranda and on the front walk in the yard. By noon there were so many wounded covering the lawn that the McCoy house looked like the infamous train station during the seige of Atlanta in the War Between the States.

The first clear description of the invaders McCoy heard while amputating the spongy remains of Willy Harrison's left arm. "...They're man-sized, mebbe a little taller..." The glassy-eyed former fire-chief recited past teeth clenched against the pain, for McCoy had run out of anesthetic an hour earlier. "...they got pointed ears, slanty eyebrows, an' green blood. I saw a little of that...not enough...they wear clothes all alike, that glitter in the sun...an' they got strange guns, pistols sort of, that shoot lightnin'... Whatever that lightnin' touches...disappears. They got us out-gunned. We can't stop 'em. They're man-sized, mebbe a little taller...they got pointed ears, slanty eyebrows an' green blood..."

The ragged end of the arm plopped into the catch-basin. Joanna McCoy winced as she put the basin aside and handed her father the gauze bandages which were all they had left. "Soon's your done here," McCoy told her, "Go upstairs and start cuttin' up all the old sheets you can find that're halfway clean." *God, this is no work for a young girl!*

"Doc, can you patch him up so's he can ride?" asked Miz Harrison, her hands pinched white from holding her husband's other arm. "We've got to cut out for Atlanta tonight."

"Atlanta!?" McCoy snapped, dressing the stump. "I wouldn't recommend that he ride as far as home! What damned business have you got in Atlanta, anyway?"

"We've got to warn folks..." Miz Harrison chewed her lip a moment, then decided to tell him the truth. "I've got a sister in Atlanta. She says there's still people there who remember how to make those old weapons, 'phasers' I think they were, what beat the Gover'ment people back in the old Moon War. We've got to get there, tell people what's happenin', tell 'em to start makin' those phasers again. That's the only way I can think of to stop these damn Space-Devils!"

"Miz Harrison, if the Space-Devils are here in Deacon's Crossing, don't you think they've already gotten to Atlanta? I'm sure people there know already. Besides, your husband won't survive the ride."

"Then I'll go myself," she blurted.

"And what'll happen to Willy? I can't put him up here; you've got to help him get home."

Molly Harrison looked away, seemed to shrink into herself, and quietly began to cry. McCoy guessed that her self-imposed mission to Atlanta had been her way of holding herself together through the crisis, and he wanted to bite his tongue for taking it away from her. *Hell, no choice!* he reminded himself, bandaging the stump and hoping to every god in the calendar that the long ride home wouldn't pull out the stitches.

By nightfall, the last of the walking wounded had been tended. McCoy tottered into the kitchen to sit down and eat for the first time that day. He was massaging his sore legs with one hand and lifting the fourth cup of sassafras tea to his mouth with the other when his wife came in and informed him, her voice flat with fatigue, that about a quarter of the wounded lying in the front yard were already dead. "Maybe another fifty or so look likely to die before morning," she added. "I sent Jo to bed. We've got only four more sheets. The iodine's gone and the peroxide's gone, but Miz Harper...Widow Harper now, came back to leave us the rest of her husband's whisky. I've got the candles lit. There's enough to last us until morning."

"Gawwd..." McCoy groaned, rubbing his bloodshot eyes. "Let me finish my tea before we start dragging them in."

Arianna nodded and went out the door, and McCoy listened to her footsteps plodding down the corridor. She was almost at the front door when the shouting started; yells of warning, howls of terror and pain, hoarse curses from those too close to dying for any more fear, and a scream in Arianna's voice.

McCoy lunged to his feet and bolted down the hall. As he reached the front door the light came, incredibly and blindingly bright. For the first instant McCoy was too dazzled to see; then he glimpsed Arianna crouching wide-eyed by the door, fierce light spilling like milk down the front steps, the wounded in the yard rolling and heaving like an unquiet sea as they struggled to pull themselves upright.

Beyond that, at the edge of the lawn, stood the Space-Devils. In the light of that single, impossibly bright, hand-held torch there was no mistaking them: Human-sized, human-shaped, with pointed ears and up-winging eyebrows, dark-haired and dark-eyed, equally divided between apparent males and females, all dressed alike in strange and glittering clothing, and all with coolly expressionless faces. There were about a dozen of them, a few calmly watching the rolling chaos in the yard, the rest staring intently at McCoy. For a long moment, all McCoy could do was stare back, shaking.

One of the wounded managed to reach his rifle, lift and aim it. McCoy didn't realize what was happening until he saw one of the aliens move, incredibly fast, aiming and firing his hand-weapon in a split second. A beam of impossible-colored light shot out, enveloping the man, the rifle, portions of several bodies close by and three square yards of lawn -- all of which pulsed, glowed, and disintegrated. More screams and moans rose up like mist from the body-strewn yard.

"Oh my God," gasped McCoy. Arianna sobbed in terror. McCoy grabbed her and threw her bodily through the door and back into the darkened house. He turned back to face the invaders, spreading his arms wide to block the doorway...*for all the good that'll do*, he thought, straining to keep his shaking legs from folding. *Anna, Jo, Got to keep them away! How? HOW? Draw their attention..?*

"Who are you?!" He shouted the first thing that came into his head. "What do you want? Stop shooting at those people, dammit! Can't you see they're already wounded? This is a hospital, you - you devils! Leave my patients alone!" He didn't know if the aliens could

hear him over the sinking cries of the wounded.

The invaders' hearing was as good as their reflexes. A dozen alien faces swivelled toward him. One of them-- apparently the leader, to judge from the long metallic drape over his shoulder -- actually smiled. He stepped forward, flanked by two obvious guards, marched calmly up the walk, up the stairs, onto the porch until he stood two paces from McCoy, then fingered a pen-like object clipped to his collar. "Do you understand me?" he asked. The syllables didn't quite match the motions of his mouth; apparently the pen-thing was some sort of translating device. McCoy nodded dumbly, sweat falling into his eyes.

"Good." The alien smiled, showing a narrow line of white teeth. "I am Sub-Praefect Vlarr, commander here. You are?"

"M-McCoy. Leonard McCoy. I'm a doctor."

"Yes." The alien blinked slowly, as if carefully connecting that fact to some unknown web of thought. "You understand Earth diseases?"

"...Diseases? Of course. Do you think I handle nothing but war-wounds every day?" *Careful. Don't antagonize. I might survive.*

"Then you will accompany us. Bring your equipment."

"What?! No! I-I'm not going anywhere!" McCoy clutched the doorframe, wondering if they'd shoot him on the spot or drag him away by force. *Maybe I can reason with them.* "I can't leave here...I mean, I have all these patients to take care of." He jerked his chin toward the littered lawn, unwilling to let go of the doorframe.

Vlarr gave another slow blink. "You have a duty toward these?"

"Yes! Yes, I do."

"Then we shall bring them with us."

"Bring - No! These people can't be moved; they can't walk, or even stand. Some of them are dying, a lot of them already dead..."

"You do not begin to understand." Vlarr gave him a look of unmistakable amusement -- with a touch of contempt. McCoy felt a small shock of recognition and anger; the first thing he'd been able to feel besides fear since he first laid eyes on these creatures. He warmed himself on that tiny flame while the alien commander took out a small shiny box, opened the lid, and snapped some brief and unintelligible orders into it. The only words McCoy could catch, translating device or no, were "probe area" and "transport natives."

What happened next very nearly made McCoy lose his head and bolt. An odd, tooth-rattling buzz filled the air and by the dozens the wounded people on the lawn became shot-through with jagged flakes of light, froze, faded and were gone.

"Do not be alarmed," said Vlarr, loftily. "They are not destroyed, only transported away from here."

McCoy nodded, saying nothing, staring as about three-fourths of the people faded away. The buzzing ceased; no more wounded disappeared. The bodies that remained were unmistakably dead. Vlarr turned to his waiting retinue and snapped out another order. The others drew their weapons, aimed at the corpses, and neatly disintegrated them. In a moment, the scarred and trampled lawn was empty.

"A health measure," said Vlarr, as his troops holstered their weapons. "One cannot leave unburied dead lying in the air. We do not know if your corpse-disposal methods are as efficient."

"Efficient..." McCoy repeated woodenly. *Burned like garbage. No words said, no next of kin notified... No more than dead animals to you, you bastards!*

"Now you will accompany us. What equipment do you wish to bring?"

"Equipment..." McCoy thought fast, imagined a dozen impossible escape-attempts and promptly rejected them, considered taking his whole surgery with him and then

remembered that Jo and Arianna would still be here and might make use of it, and finally settled on a few essentials. "Uhn, just my travelling-bag and by books, I guess. I'll go fetch 'em..." As he backed through the doorway the three aliens stepped after him, as he'd half expected. Resigned, he turned and led the way through the house to his surgery, the three aliens strolling behind him, Vlarr glancing about with frank curiosity.

As they passed the stairs, McCoy saw Arianna crouched on the landing with the family rifle in her hands. *No, Anna! Don't do anything to provoke -* "Anna," he called up to her, trying to sound calm, "I'm going with them. Mind the store while I'm gone." He wanted to add a dozen endearments and a goodbye for Jo, but it occurred to him that the aliens didn't necessarily know that he had a family, or that Anna was his wife, and he'd best not tell them. It occurred to him also, as he went into the surgery and rummaged around in the litter of interrupted work, that he might never see his wife and daughter again. Fortunately his travelling-bag was in its usual cupboard where he could find it without looking, for his eyes were too full of tears to be of help. His other white coat was on its usual hanger in the closet, and he grabbed that too.

"Which 'books' do you require?" asked Vlarr, studying McCoy's bookshelf with that amused/contemptuous look back on his face.

"I'll get 'em," snapped McCoy, rubbing his eyes clear. The choice wasn't hard: his two pharmacy texts--the modern herbal and the precious ancient encyclopedia of long-lost synthetics -- the compendium of communicable diseases, the one on functional disorders, the outline of public-health problems and techniques. He noticed one book hastily shoved in at the end of the shelf; one of the few non-medicals he kept in here, he remembered seeing his daughter reading it the day before, and suddenly couldn't bear to leave it behind. There was another book beside it, by the same author, that was one of Arianna's favorites. He took that one too, grimacing over the horribly-apt irony of the title. "All right," he said, balancing the load of books in his arms. "I'm ready. Let's go."

The aliens promptly moved in close. Vlarr took out his little communication-box and snapped: "Transport full party." The eerie buzzing began. This time McCoy felt it rattling inside him. The entire room appeared to fill with the jagged light-flakes -- and then McCoy realized, to his horror, that the shivering lights were not in the room but in his eyes, in himself. He tried to yell a protest, but found he couldn't move. The room faded into a blinding blizzard of light flakes, filled with the fierce buzzing, and McCoy felt as if he were being turned inside out.

It lasted only an instant; the rattling light-blizzard faded, revealing a totally different and alien room, dome-shaped, with pale smooth walls. They were standing on a platform with a sort of table to one side and another uniformed invader behind it. "Wh-where?" McCoy managed to say, past uncontrollable shudders.

"We are in the third service-dome of our temporary quarters," said Vlarr, "On top of the geographical feature your kind call 'Table Mountain.' Come this way."

"Table Mountain..." *Two miles away. Two miles, in the blink of an eye! That was really the last straw.* The books fell out of his numb arms, and his knees buckled. He vaguely registered a snapped oath and oddly-hot hands catching him before the welcome dark closed over his head.

There was light beyond his closed eyes and a hot hand shaking him. McCoy woke grudgingly, opened his eyes, and was immediately sorry for it. *No dream,* he thought, wincing away from the alien touch and pulling himself up. *It's all true, and I'm still here.*

The alien bending over him was a stranger, wearing a different sort of uniform: a pale-green shirt somewhat

like a lab-coat with an odd emblem on one shoulder and another of those pen-sized translators on the collar. "You are awake," he said, in a voice no kinder than Vlarr's. "You must wash, dress and eat. Then I will take you to our infirmary."

"Who are you?" *Infirmary? They want me to...why?*

"I am Yilad, physician, 453rd legion, Empire of Rom. Wash now."

"Uh, yeah." McCoy pulled back the covers over him and realized to his embarrassment that he was naked. They'd left his watch and fountain-pen on a table near the bed, but everything else was gone. "Where are my clothes?"

"They are being decontaminated. You will wear this."

Yilad held out a uniform like his own, complete with high boots. McCoy took the clothes, wincing at the soft, strange feel of them. "Wash first. The facilities are here." Yilad gestured impatiently toward a door.

McCoy got up, angry at the subtle sneer in the alien's words and treatment, and went to the indicated door which slid sideways. Behind it was an unmistakable wash-basin, an urn-shaped commode, and a booth with a dial on one wall and a circular grill in the ceiling. McCoy guessed that the booth was some sort of shower, stepped into it and fiddled with the dial. Instead of water, the grill emitted a beam of yellow light and a shivering vibration. McCoy yelled and jumped back.

Yilad caught him. "Do not be afraid," he droned, as if this was no more than one could expect from the primitives. "That is only the effect of the sonics. They will not harm you. Go back under them. I will tell you when to come out."

"All right." McCoy hitched his shoulders higher and stomped back under the humming light, furiously determined that these Space-Devils would never, ever see him panicked again. He gritted his teeth against the vibrations, noting sourly that they were curiously comforting and did efficiently flake off a surprising amount of dirt. *Good for muscle cramps, probably...* he admitted. *But I'll stick with hot baths.*

"Come out," ordered Yilad, holding up a furry cloth that crackled with static. "Use this, then dress. Move quickly; there is not much time."

McCoy glowered and did as he was told. The clothes didn't fit well, but they were comfortable and quite clean. Breakfast, he discovered as he came back out of the washroom, was a suspicious mess of "Synthetic proteins, constructed to fit your metabolism" that the alien took from a slot in the wall. McCoy forced himself to eat the stuff without visible distaste, but it tasted like peppered sawdust and he couldn't finish. No drink was included, and he had to ask for water.

"You creatures require more water than we do," Yilad commented. "How much water per individual per day?"

"That depends on a lotta' things: climate, activity, health..."

"This climate, heavy activity, average health."

"Uhm... What exactly do you mean by 'heavy activity'? What sorta' work do you have in mind?"

"Crude labor: building construction in native stone."

McCoy felt the hair lift on his head. *Is that what they want us for? Chain-gang slaves?* "Oh, er, a couple gallons a day, at least. Figure a quart of water for every hour of work... And salt. Lotsa salt, or they'll keel right over in the heat."

"Expensive..." Yilad frowned. "Perhaps we should use them only for food production."

"You mean you'll eat us?!" McCoy gasped, scrambling out of his chair, "Oh my God, no! Did you bring me here to be nothing more than a - a meat inspector?"

Yilad didn't say anything, but he gave McCoy a long, calculating look.

McCoy remembered his earlier vow, pulled himself together, and thought fast. "Wait," he panted, "Wait

a minute. I know where you can get lots of water, plenty of salt with it. You can get it with that - that transporting machine. Look, the ocean isn't that far from here; there's all the water you need, good and salty, and it isn't hard to evaporate the salt out of it. Plenty of other minerals in it, too: iodine -- we need that, too -- and lots of gold and silver..." *Maybe they're not greedy for those.*

"Perhaps," said Yilad noncommittally. "Come, it is time to go."

A brief walk down a corridor brought them into another, much larger dome. It was filled with beds, jammed so close that McCoy could scarcely move between them. The beds were filled with injured people, some of whom he recognized, all of them tied down, many of them groaning quietly. Besides a few pale-shirted alien doctors, there were uniformed guards patrolling around the room. McCoy clenched his teeth at the sight. "Where's my bag?" he growled. Yilad signalled to one of the other pale-shirted aliens and rattled off a brief order; the under-physician dutifully hurried off and came back in less than a minute carrying McCoy's old black medical bag. McCoy practically snatched it from her and went to the nearest bed.

The patient was Jabe Beasley. He was lying on his back, staring sightlessly at the ceiling, a muscle in his jaw twitching. His left leg was gone just below the knee, and the stump was neatly covered with scarless new skin. McCoy stared, and wondered if his mind was cracking. "That looks like it's been healing for weeks, but only yesterday..." He turned to Yilad, who was peering expectantly over his shoulder. "Did you do that? Oh, of course. How is it done?"

"A device which increases the speed of cell-regeneration. There are many versions and models, many of them portable. After the amputation it healed the wound to its present condition in 1.3 minutes."

"One...point three...minutes..." McCoy repeated, dazed. "Lord!"

Jabe slowly raised his head, finally recognizing that voice. "Doc?" he whispered. "That you?"

"It's me all right." McCoy forced his face into a reassuring grin and took one of his neighbor's clenched hands. "They brought me along to take care of you. You're gonna' be fine, Jabe."

"No." Jabe shook his head and lay back down. "They took off my leg. Didn't use no pain-killer. I still feel like dyin'..."

"You hush, Jabe Beasley! I'm the doctor here, and I say you're going to be all right. You just need some sleep..." McCoy felt around in his black bag and came up with a hypodermic and -- thank heaven -- a forgotten injection bottle of morphine. Yilad watched him closely as he loaded the hypo and emptied it into Jabe's near arm. "There, that'll take care of the pain. You get some sleep now. I don't want to see you awake until tomorrow."

Jabe relaxed slowly, rolled his eyes for a moment, noticed the alien hanging over McCoy, and shuddered. "Doc," he gasped, "What do they want us for? Why're they here?"

"I don't know." *...only half a lie...* "I'll try to find out. You sleep." McCoy held Jabe's hand until the complete relaxation and slow breathing showed total unconsciousness. Then he turned toward Yilad, blue eyes blazing. "You complete monster!" he whispered, "You performed an amputation with no anesthetic? You're lucky the man didn't die of shock. What's the matter with you people? Don't you know what pain is?"

"According to our observations," Yilad replied, unmoved, "You did the same in your infirmary, just yesterday."

"I had no choice! I was out of everything except this one bottle that I'd forgotten about. You sure as hell don't have that excuse!"

"Then consider this one: we do not yet understand the biochemistry of your species, and did not wish to use chemicals which might prove fatal." Yilad's expression looked remarkably like a human indication of anger. "We did in fact experiment with anesthetics known to us; in all cases the subjects died. There were some deaths when we proceeded without anesthetics, but the majority of the subjects survived. Since you possess a sample of an anesthetic proven safe to your species, give it to me and I will synthesize more." He held out his hand for the injection-bottle.

"Synthesize...?" McCoy hesitated a moment, glanced around the ward and realized that this one bottle wouldn't possibly be enough for all these wounded, and reluctantly handed it to Yilad. "It's an extract from a vegetable, a red flower called a poppy -- grows right here in Georgia. I can get more if you'll let me go back to town..." *...see home again...*

"Unnecessary. We can synthesize all that you require in our laboratory. You may watch the procedure, if you wish."

"Damn tootin', I wish!" McCoy grabbed his bag, scrambled to his feet and hastily followed Yilad out of the ward.

The alien laboratory was another vast dome; the size of it, not to mention the equipment, left McCoy speechless. He stared, gulping occasionally, while Yilad explained the nature and operation of the synthesizer. He remembered stories of machines like this, back in the fabulous Old Days before the Eugenic Wars, but seeing the legends come to life stunned him into pop-eyed silence. *Got to learn them, he told himself. Machines -- the ancient evil -- but used like this? Like this? ...in the hands of these Space-Devils...all the other ancient evils -- war, conquest, governments, slavery -- they're already here. Why not have science too?*

"I want to learn about these machines." His voice jumped away from him. "I want to learn all these things. If I'm to be any use here, I've got to know them."

"You will." Yilad smiled over his shoulder. "We will teach you all the knowledge you can absorb."

McCoy bristled at that, shut his mouth and watched. In a few moments the machine produced several dozen bottles identical to the original. McCoy swept up as many as his bag would hold and went back to the ward. Yilad continued to smile approvingly as he watched him go.

It took only two hours to finish his round of the ward; all the injuries had been expertly treated, and McCoy could do little except apply the morphine and reassure the wounded. Everywhere he heard the same questions: "Why are we here? What do they want with us?" He could say nothing except that he didn't know. He finished the last patient and went to the door, hoping to get back to that fabulous laboratory. The door opened before he reached it. There stood Vlarr, Yilad behind him, and two more guards.

"You will accompany us," said the Sub-Praefect, striding toward another door. McCoy couldn't think of anything to do except follow.

Vlarr led them into what appeared to be a small conference-room, sat down, waved for McCoy to do likewise, and sent the guards to wait outside. There was a row of buttons and a small glass screen set into the table in front of him; he punched several of the buttons and turned to McCoy. "We are now being monitored and recorded," he said. "Answer all questions thoroughly, and do not lie."

"I-I've heard about machines like that..." McCoy watched as undecipherable lines played across the screen. "Mind of I ask a question or two of my own?"

"Proceed." Vlarr looked faintly amused.

"All those people in there -- you've taken good care of their injuries, and by tomorrow they'll be fit to go. Will you send them home?"

"No. Not until we have obtained healthy replacements."

"Replacements?" McCoy felt sweat starting on his forehead, and saw lines jiggling on the screen. "For what? What do you want from our people, anyway?"

"Their labor." Vlarr paused, then twitched his hands sideways -- perhaps his equivalent of a shrug -- and continued. "We intend to build a power-generation installment here, which will transmit power directly to the two large population centers in this province. Your kind call these areas 'Atlanta' and 'Savannah,' and they lie in direct line-of-sight from this mountain. Permanent structures will be required. Your kind will build them, under our supervision."

"Slave-labor. I guessed as much." Out of sight in his lap, McCoy clenched his fists. The screen flared with lines; the two aliens glanced at them, then back at him, faces unreadable. "Humans don't take kindly to slavery, you know. Never have. They'll fight you, any way they can. Punish 'em all you like; it'll just make 'em meaner, angrier, more determined. Its happened before."

"We shall destroy their structures and supplies of food; they will then depend on us to feed and shelter them, and we shall require their labor and obedience in exchange."

"That's been done too, and it didn't work either. Sooner or later people decide they'd rather starve free. They'll run off in the wilderness, live in caves and eat roots, go clean back to the Stone Age, if that's what it takes to be free. Hell, how do you think the old civilization fell?"

The aliens lifted their heads in surprise. McCoy realized that they didn't know much, maybe nothing at all, about Earth history. There might be some powerful advantage in that, but he couldn't think of how to use it.

"Our sensing devices showed that there had once been an advanced civilization here," said Vlarr. "We wondered what had befallen it." Yilad seemed about to add something, but stopped.

"Well, now you know. It was a tyranny, and humans don't put up with that. We just plain weren't cut out to be slaves."

Vlarr leaned back in his chair, one hand settling idly over the light-screen, and gave McCoy an expressionless stare. "You had best find some way to convince them, Doctor," he said. "We mean to make good use of this planet. If the natives will not provide us with labor, then they will provide us with...meat."

Light-lines danced furiously on the screen between Vlarr's fingers. He smiled slowly, very widely, letting McCoy see that his eye-teeth were long and pointed.

"Oh my God..." whispered McCoy, clutching the edge of the table and trying frantically not to faint. His vision wavered, then cleared, and he managed to raise his head and look the Space-Devils in the eyes. "Is that...what you mean to do...with those people out there?"

"Only if you do not cooperate," said Vlarr, folding his hands in front of him. "They are hostages for your good behavior."

"My good behavior? Why? What do you want from me?"

"You are knowledgeable with Earth diseases," Yilad spoke up as if he'd been waiting for this. "We wish you to examine certain of our troops who have contracted such."

McCoy understood. He gave a short, bitter laugh. "All this, just to make sure I take good care of your people? Hell, it wasn't necessary. I'm a doctor, not a poisoner. I don't know about you people, but I take my oath seriously."

Yilad abruptly turned the color of old parchment. He started to lunge out of his chair, but Vlarr caught his arm and shoved him back into his seat, jabbed at both their translators and rattled off a long stream of his own language. Yilad took a deep breath and made a

visible effort to calm himself. Vlarr fingered his translator again and turned back to McCoy. For just an instant there was a look of faintly-amused, grudging respect -- the kind of look a human might give to a brave, smart and capable enemy.

"I warn you," he said, "not to accuse any Rom of being an oath-breaker. To us also, that is offensive."

"Then don't treat my people like animals." Not meat-animals! "We're not cattle for you."

"Agreed." Vlarr almost smiled. "We understand each other. Now Yilad will accompany you to the main ward." He pressed more buttons. The screen went blank and the doors opened, revealing the waiting guards.

Yilad made no hostile gesture through the long walk to the main ward, but McCoy kept out of his reach anyway. No word passed between them until the ward doors closed behind them, shutting out the guards. McCoy paused, noticing that this dome was much less crowded, and the beds were screened with solid partitions; apparently the 'Rom'ei' liked their privacy. Yilad caught his arm, lightly but firmly.

"You are clever," was all he said, but there was a subtle unmistakable apology in it.

"Well, I wouldn't be much of a doctor if I were stupid," McCoy ventured to smile. "And I'm not too old to learn. Let's go look at the patients."

The beds were equipped with monitoring-machines that not only kept track of vital signs but could, at the turn of a dial, display detailed views of the internal organs -- right down to specific cells. Yilad patiently explained how to use the machine, and McCoy was so intrigued with it that for several minutes he actually forgot about the patient.

"This one suffers," Yilad nudged him, "from a digestive inflammation and has not been able to retain any food or drink for three days. He caught it from drinking untreated water."

The patient looked terrible: weak, pale, badly dehydrated and obviously suffering terribly. He rolled sunken eyes at Yilad, and mumbled something about seeing the natives drink the water with no trouble. Yilad gave him a withering glance, and showed McCoy how to make the machine display an image of the infecting bacteria.

McCoy had no trouble identifying it; he just had trouble believing it. "Damn, that's nothing but common-or-garden variety nonspecific diarrhea - Montezuma's Revenge! It couldn't hurt a fly. Why's he so sick with it?"

Yilad blinked. "I am not familiar with the metabolism of flies."

"They're insects, common pests, that... Wait a minute. Insects...copper-based blood. Green blood! That's the answer. My Lord..." He turned slowly toward Yilad, eyes widening as the implications began to sink in. "You people, you Roms, you don't...have...any...immunities..."

"Our immune-systems have proved quite efficient to date."

"Not on Earth, not with Earth bugs. Oh, you're probably immune to things that could infect insects, but diseases that any red-blooded beast could shrug off would make short work of you. And so much of our animal-life is red-blooded -- not to mention ourselves... Uh, Yilad, I wouldn't advise using my people for slave labor, food, or anything else. I'd advise staying to hell away from them. In fact, I'd advise getting all the Roms off Earth as fast as possible -- and then quarantining 'em for a long time."

"That is unacceptable. It is highly improbable that many of your diseases can attack cells as totally different as ours are from yours. This current infection is the inevitable exception to the rule. Such an unfortunately synergistic complex is unlikely to be encountered again."

"But this isn't one bug; it's several. It's a change in the whole complex of intestinal ecology."

McCoy sighed and ran his fingers through his hair.

"What would you recommend for this case?"

He refuses to face the facts...or he's afraid to.

"Well...I don't know anything about Rom biochemistry -- gonna have to learn that from scratch. I can't think of anything that would kill the bugs without killing the patient. All I can suggest is simple mechanical stuff: something to stop peristalsis -- opium or belladonna, something to plug the intestines for awhile -- maybe good ol' kaolin and pectin and bismuth salicylate wouldn't hurt. Then just wait and hope that your patients can work up some immunity to the thing."

"We shall attempt it. Come, there are others suffering from the same complaint."

In fact, there were nearly a dozen, seven males, four females, and they hadn't all drunk the same water. Those who had been affected for more than two days were badly dehydrated. McCoy saw an ominous pattern in this, but couldn't convince Yilad.

The last case was a real shocker: incredible fever, unconsciousness, swollen joints, bloated fingers and toes, runaway inflammation of all mucous membranes, raw throat and completely-blocked nasal passages. "He did not drink untreated water nor come into any contact with the natives," said Yilad, dialing the display. "The infecting organism is extremely small, and possibly could be air-borne. Do you recognize it?"

"Sure do," said McCoy, comparing the screen's image with an illustration in one of his precious ancient textbooks. "That organism is known 'round here as a virus. What he's got is the Common Cold. It's everywhere on Earth, and there's no cure for it."

"No cure?" Yilad looked distinctly worried.

"He'll just have to suffer through it until he works up an immunity on his own. Keep pouring water down him, keep him warm, maybe give him vitamin C and a couple aspirins. That's what to do for it in humans; we get over it in a couple days."

"He has been affected for five days," commented Yilad, taking notes.

"Look, Yilad; you're people have caught one virus and one bacterial infection already. Don't you think there'll be more?"

"Unlikely." The alien refused to consider it. "Now we shall return to the laboratory for your instruction."

McCoy was more than willing to return to that incredible laboratory. He scarcely noticed that Yilad had set aside a desk for him and a shelf for his books, or what this implied about his standing among the Rom'ei; he was too busy running from machine to machine, learning everything he could cram into his head. He didn't notice the time passing until Yilad insisted that it was time for him to eat and then sleep, and then he complied only under protest. Once he was out of the lab, fatigue and hunger made their presence known. His old pocket-watch informed him that he'd been awake and running for nearly twenty hours. He ate two helpings of the pepper-and-sawdust food, and fell asleep over the third.

Next morning, Yilad showed him how to operate the food-slot, then took him directly to the main ward. Some of the milder cases of Montezuma's Revenge seemed to be improving, but about half of them were worse. McCoy could feel Yilad's unreadable eyes on him, and he remembered the hostages in the next ward, and he wondered shiveringly how many of them would die for each Rom he couldn't cure. That worry made him shakey and sweaty-handed, and he had trouble working the diagnostic scanner smoothly. It took several reworkings of the screen to convince him -- and, hopefully, Yilad -- that the intestinal infections just plain weren't dying as fast as they should have.

"No immunity, as I said," McCoy explained. "Defenses slow and not terribly effective. At this rate, it'll take a couple weeks to clear up."

"I doubt that many of them can survive that long." Yilad's voice was icy. "You had best find some other treatment."

"Dammit, I don't know any other treatment! Your own antibiotics won't touch this stuff, as you said, and I don't dare try any of ours. Anyway, there's no reason why they shouldn't last a couple weeks. The dehydration has stopped, they're not losing water any more, and they could probably start taking liquid food by tomorrow."

"That is not the problem," Yilad pointed to one of the dials. "You will note that the level of neuro-activity is high."

"Yes, and I don't understand it. The stuff I prescribed should have stopped the pain completely. Now granted, Montezuma's Revenge can be pretty miserable, and your people have it bad, but either opium or belladonna would take care of that."

"On the contrary: those substances are the cause of the extreme nervous activity." Yilad gave him a flat, disapproving look. "They stop the pain, but they cause vivid and extremely unpleasant hallucinations. Do not be deceived by the fact that they appear asleep; the patients are being terrified to death."

"Oh." McCoy gulped. "In that case, use some of your own medicines for retarding peristalsis."

"I tried that when the patients first arrived. Our medicines, unfortunately, provide an excellent growing-medium for the infection."

"Whew! In that case, you might risk going without. That'd mean doubling the dosage of bismuth and kaolin."

"In larger doses, bismuth salicylate also causes painful hallucinations, and your mixture of kaolin and pectin forms clumps that tear the intestine."

"I see..." McCoy rubbed sweat off his forehead and put his worries about the hostages carefully out of his mind. "Then all I can suggest is that you keep pouring clean water down them as fast as they lose it, and hope that they survive."

"We shall attempt that with some of them, as a control-group. Now, if you will examine this case of Common Cold..."

The cold victim was a wretched sight. There were tubes jammed into him to keep him breathing, drain his lungs, run fluids into and out of him, and so his hands and feet were a little less bloated, but still swollen. He was thoroughly tied down, twitching restlessly against the bonds, and raving feverishly as best he could past the tubes. McCoy looked away from the glassy, half-open, green-bloodshot eyes and busied himself with the monitoring machine. "Well," he tried to sound hopeful, "The viral count hasn't increased. It looks like he's fighting it off." *Fighting! Literally!* "The fever's actually down a little; I don't know why he's delirious..."

"Your 'aspirin' -- apparently all the salicylates cause violent hallucinations. They also seem to place great stress on the kidneys."

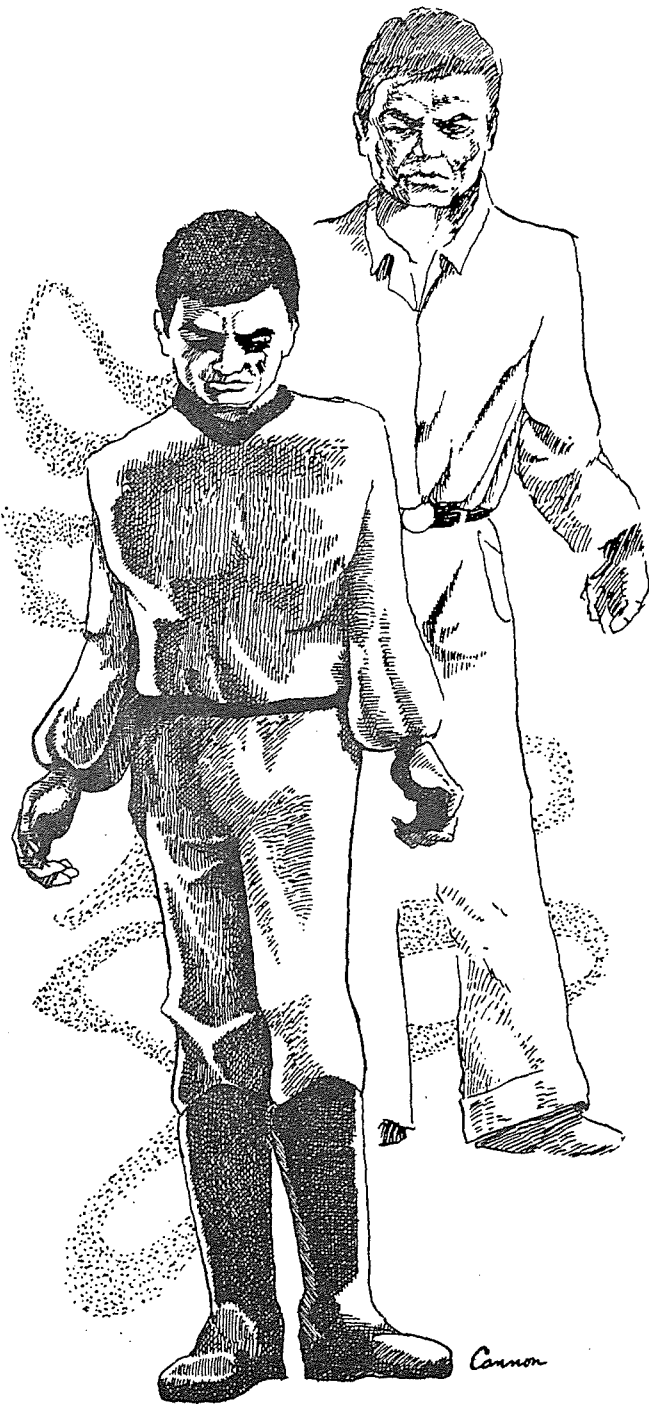
"Dammit, don't you people have any medicines of your own that'll reduce pain, bring down fever, and stop vascular dilation?"

"We do, unfortunately, none of them perform all three functions at once, and in combination they place even greater stress on the kidneys than does your aspirin. Given the fluid-balance problem, we cannot risk it."

"Christ..." *Enemies, aliens, slavers...still it's awful to watch them suffer like that...* "All I can say is the same as with the others. Keep at it, and hope he survives. I'm going to have to learn all about your biochemistry before I can do much more. I'm sorry, Yilad. Really, I am."

"Acknowledged." Yilad turned away, almost as if embarrassed. "Come. We have four new cases for you to observe."

"Cases of what?" McCoy asked, following the long-strided alien down another of those confusing corridors.



"Some unknown skin infection, apparently contracted from touching wet soil."

Yilad led him into another dome, this one with a series of sealed doors, probably a high-contagion isolation area. Inside, stretched out under high-intensity lamps and looking miserable, were four Rom soldiers with big ugly marks on their skins. McCoy studied the marks -- glassy, raised, sloughing circles -- and bit back an exclamation as he recognized it. "Ringworm! Ugliest mess of it I ever saw in my life, but it's nothing but plain ol' ringworm."

The four victims turned very pale. "'Ring...worm?'" gulped one of them. "Give me my knife."

"Not yet," snapped Yilad. "You are familiar with this, Doctor. How did the worm entrench itself under the skin? What is its nature, and can you remove it?"

"Sure I can. It isn't really a worm, just a tropical fungus infection, and there are several reliable cures for it." He fumbled around in his black bag. "Here's one: creosote. Now first we shave off the hair... You're lucky you got this on your leg instead of your

head. There. Now we paint the area with creosote."

"Give me a sample of this 'creosote'. I shall synthesize more," said Yilad, looking strangely tense -- almost eager. "Is it effective on all tropical fungus infections?"

"Not all, but quite a few... Hey, it shouldn't blister like that!" McCoy watched, astonished, as the skin adjacent to the fungal ring flushed green, swelled and arched up in angry blisters. The victim clutched his leg, gasping in pain. "I don't understand it," McCoy insisted, turning to Yilad. "Is he allergic, hypersensitive?"

"Perhaps." Yilad reached into a belt-pouch, pulled out something that resembled a hypodermic without a needle, slapped a small capsule into it, pressed it against the patient's shoulder and depressed the plunger. There was a sharp hissing. The capsule emptied, and the Rom soldier sighed, let go of his leg, and quietly leaned back on the couch, oblivious to the fierce inflammation of his leg.

Anesthetic, intramuscular... thought McCoy. *But how...?* "How did you shoot that into him? That hypo doesn't have a needle!"

"Pressured in," said Yilad, bending over to examine the inflamed area. "This creosote must not be allowed to touch healthy flesh. With a microapplicator, perhaps... How often must it be applied?"

"Twice a day." McCoy handed Yilad the bottle of creosote and slipped past him to study the monitor screen, dialing up the view to an image of the creosote damaged cells. "Simple chemical burn," he muttered. "Your skin-chemistry's different...high oil content..."

It occurred to him what a marvelous machine this was; a turn of its dials could reveal skin or deep organs, whole bone or muscle fibers or cells or chromosomes or even molecules, and it made diagnosis almost ridiculously easy. McCoy remembered the scandal during his last year in medical school; three instructors and eight graduate students dismissed and anathemized all over the county, only for trying to re-invent the X-ray machine. *So instead we've got conquerors from space, who have machines like this...* He watched Yilad injecting another patient with that needleless hypo, and remembered how difficult it was to get ordinary hypodermic needles; no one but jewelers and watch-smiths had the equipment for making them. *Call me a heretic, but I believe in science!* he thought, angrily turning off the viewer. *And these aliens, with all they have...make me look like a bead-shaking stone-age witch-doctor... What the hell am I doing here, anyway?*

Yilad tapped him on the shoulder and snapped him out of his mood. "Come. There are others with fungus infections. We must see if your creosote will benefit them also."

...others? McCoy wondered, following the alien into another treatment cubicle. *I thought you said there were only four...*

There were six cases in here, all with bandaged heads and glassy-eyed expressions. "Anesthetized," Yilad explained, "To keep them from scratching the sores. This one has been infected for three days." He went to the nearest patient and untied the turban of bandages. Handfuls of hair came off with the wrappings, and double-handfuls of flaked-off skin. The scalp was raw and bleeding in several spots.

McCoy looked carefully at the ravaged scalp, feeling oddly disoriented, as if his usual scale of values fell several degrees short. *Dandruff? That bad? In three days?! Impossible! Or is it?* He went to the viewer and confirmed his guess. "It's dandruff, all right. On a human, it'd take years without washing to get this bad. Our local fungi must love the taste of your skins."

"It would be difficult to apply creosote without getting it in the sores," Yilad considered.

"Downright impossible. Shave his head and expose him to direct sunlight. No, better still...something the ancients used... Do you have a source of ultra-

violet radiation? Fine. Shave his head, bandage his eyes, and stick him under the radiation for a couple days. Use the creosote on less-advance cases."

"And on more advanced cases?"

"What do you mean, 'more advanced'?"

For answer, Yilad unbandaged another patient -- a woman this time -- and showed him. Her scalp was almost completely gone. Bare muscles gleamed wet green under the lights. "Oh my God," gasped McCoy, "Radiation! Fast!" Yilad snapped brief orders. Attendants brought a stretcher and wheeled the woman away. "How long has she had it?" McCoy asked weakly.

"Eight days. Will the hair grow back, think you?"

"No way. Not with damage like that."

Yilad sighed imperceptibly, gazing after the woman. "For a Rom," he said, "It is a great disgrace to be hairless. I doubt if she will wish to continue..."

Is she someone you care about? McCoy wondered. "Well, you could try grafting on skin with continuous-growth hair follicles... Hmm, the problem would be getting enough skin..."

"We might use the scalp of the next Rom who dies," Yilad considered. "There are enough with the same blood-type."

"Wait a minute." McCoy leaned on the monitoring-machine to steady himself, briefly dizzy as he considered the implications of that. "Yilad, do you people have some means of -- of suppressing your immune-reactions?"

"Yes." Yilad's straight eyebrows rose a fraction.

"You are clever, as I said."

"You'd better not do it. Not if you intend to breathe our air afterwards. If you've got any method of doing the opposite, I'd recommend it. Fast."

Yilad paused for an instant. "We shall consider it," he said. "Now come this way. There is another kind of fungus infection you should see."

Another one? Another one?? *This wasn't a ward, it was a chamber of horrors and Yilad blindly refused to see that he was the engineer of all this, and worse to come, if he blithely went on believing that they could overcome these 'problems'. And as for heightening their immunity reactions, I'll bet they can't do it! You can't heighten what you don't have, and in this case they had no real immunities. They're gonna' be eaten alive!*

McCoy continued to ponder the situation as he dutifully followed Yilad.

There were only three sufferers in this ward, two of them drugged quiet, the third encased in a machine that resembled a legendary respirator. Yilad went to the first two and pulled back the covers to show McCoy the blotches of blue-green mold spreading out from groins and armpits.

"Two days," said Yilad woodenly. "Two days, and it has gone this far."

McCoy bent over the nearer patient, one part of his mind noting the physiological differences between Rom and human, the other part trying to identify the incredibly prolific mold. It was the smell that gave it away. "Mildew! My Lord, that's the first time I've ever heard of mildew attacking a living creature! It usually grows on old blankets and wet sheets and -- and Bleach! Chlorine bleach kills it. I don't pretend to know what that'll do to their skins, much less mucous membranes... I don't have any with me, but bleach is made of sodium hypochlorate and water."

"That...will cause painful burns."

"Try radiation, then. Sunlight often takes mildew out of wet sheets. Ultra-violet treatment won't hurt, not as much as bleach, anyway."

"Both treatments would be impossible in the third case." Yilad showed him the grim view on the monitor screen. "It has affected his lungs."

McCoy looked once and turned away. *More! More! All the time more and each worse than the last. I hope to God that you aren't building up to anything*

worse than this! "Poor devil... If you can't find some way of irradiating those lungs, he's finished. Uh, I don't suppose radiation would do the lung tissue much good, even if you could find a way..."

"No." Yilad turned off the viewer. "What would you recommend for prevention of such infestations?"

"If you have some method for it, sterilize the air in these buildings. Outside, wear some sort of filter-masks. Hell, encase yourselves in air-tight armor! Don't drink the water. Don't breathe the air I wouldn't suggest eating the local food, either."

"Your suggestions, if implemented, would make colonization more difficult -- and expensive." Yilad turned a cool stare on him. "Perhaps you hope to thus discourage us from exploiting your world."

"Who, me?" McCoy snorted. "I can't convince you; I'm just one of the natives, and nobody takes us seriously. Believe what you like, Yilad. I'm a doctor, not a politician. All I can do is tell you that Earth's viral infections and bacteria and fungi are going to eat you up if you stay! I'm not inventing the horrors you just showed me! If you won't accept the evidence of your own eyes, and you won't believe my medical diagnosis of the situation, then we're both faced with a hopeless task. The most advanced case you showed me was barely over a week old. What do you think things are going to be like after a month? He stamped toward the door, no clear goal in mind and not sure that the guards would let him out, but needing to prove his point."

Yilad caught him just before he reached the door.

"Stop," he said, fingers digging into McCoy's arm.

"You cannot leave here without going through decontamination procedures. The guards would reduce you to atoms on sight."

"Oh." McCoy let the alien lead him through another door, into a light-studded and vibration-humming chamber. Yilad stripped off his clothes and stuffed them into a chute, and gestured for McCoy to do likewise. McCoy felt a twinge of embarrassment at being naked in front of the alien, much as he could see the reason for it, and he wondered why Yilad showed no such reaction. Maybe the Rom had no nudity taboos. *Why not? Different in damn-near everything else. He ran covert glances up and down Yilad's body, noting the subtly-different hair patterns, musculature, joint and bone-shapes. Alien...completely alien. I know almost nothing about them. How the hell can I treat them when I don't know how their bodies work? I know how to kill the bugs, but I don't know how not to kill the patient in the process. They must be crazy to let me treat them. Crazy or...desperate...? A wild idea began taking form.* "Yilad," he said, "I want to talk to you for a bit."

"Clever," The alien gave him a tight smile. "This is an excellent place for it. There are no listening devices here. You may speak what is in your mind."

"You spy on each other?" McCoy stepped back in disgust. *The ancient evils. Hell, what did I expect?* "No, never mind that now. Yilad, how many of your people have come down with native diseases since you first landed?"

"I am not at liberty to say." Yilad looked away, small muscle in his throat twitching.

"How many of them has your medicine been able to cure?"

Yilad didn't exactly slump, but something inside him seemed to collapse. "None. None whatsoever."

"How many have died, Yilad?"

"I, I am not at liberty..."

"How many have recovered by themselves?"

"None whatever." Yilad's voice was barely audible above the hum of the machines.

"So you were desperate enough to seek out a human doctor? Even if I know nothing about you people, your bodies, your chemistry, you thought I'd know how to kill the damn bugs, or at least prevent them..."

McCoy distractedly ran one hand through his hair. "Why me, Yilad? Out of all the doctors in the world, why a small-town country GP like me?"

"You were not the first." Yilad stared fixedly at an invisible spot on the wall. "There were other attempts in other population areas. They were unsuccessful. We had reason to believe that the humans were deliberately poisoning us, so they could not be trusted further. They were all executed."

"Uh..." McCoy quickly moved toward the wall and leaned on it. "B-but you trust me. Why?"

"In your case, we have hostages to insure your good behavior. Also..." Yilad turned toward him, face set and eyes burning. Almost casually he reached out, wrapped his hands around McCoy's neck and squeezed -- not enough to stop blood-flow, just enough to cut off his air. "You understand," he continued, as McCoy clawed helplessly at his hands, "as the others did not, that if you cause harm to Rom -- by action or refraining from action -- we are quite willing to kill you, you and yours, and eat you afterward."

"Ggk-" *...hot hands hot strong as wire strong as a bull dear god let me-* The choking grip eased slightly, letting him breathe, and McCoy managed to force out words. "Not...necessary!" The hands loosened a little further. "You didn't have to...threaten me. I'm a doctor...first, last, always. I've got my oath...believe in it..." Yilad abruptly let go. McCoy sagged against the wall, gulping air.

"Yes, there is that," said the alien. "This I can understand. Even Vlarr can understand it. We too have taken oaths. You are the first human we have met who has even mentioned such a thing."

"Oh." McCoy rubbed his neck and considered that, yes, humans would seem just as strange and inexplicable to the Rom as vice-versa.

"It was at my suggestion," Yilad continued, "that we follow the wounded after the battle, to see where they would go for aid. I recognized you for a healer when I saw you treating them. We then showed ourselves, to see how you would react. When we saw you defend the wounded, take responsibility for them, reveal your duty to them -- even though you were unarmed and totally incapable of resisting us -- then Vlarr recognized that you might be trustworthy. Therefore we brought you here."

"Uh-huh," McCoy took all that in and made another good guess. "You mean, you're responsible to Vlarr for the success of this, uh, experiment?"

"Yes." A rueful smile twitched the corners of Yilad's mouth. "If Vlarr finds it necessary to destroy you, I will most probably be required to commit honorable suicide."

"God... Damn!"

The lights and humming vibrators shut off suddenly, making McCoy's ears ring in the unexpected silence. In the dim remaining light he saw two uniforms drop neatly from a wall-slot. Yilad picked them up and handed one to McCoy. They dressed in silence. A moment later the far doors opened, and they walked out into another corridor.

"This way," Yilad guided him toward the first of a series of doors. "We shall spend the rest of the watch in the laboratory."

"Damn right," McCoy agreed. "I've got to learn about your physiology, and damn fast. Don't want my cures to be worse than the diseases."

"That," Yilad admitted, "Would be difficult."

McCoy never did have time to just sit down and study the Rom physiology the way he would have liked, but had to learn as he went along. The increasing case-load robbed him of all spare time; he worked twelve hours a day, going from case to case with Yilad beside him, identifying the countless infecting organisms, finding the medicine that would neutralize each invading microbe, running to the bio-computer lab to see what the cure would do to the patient, and grimly watching nearly

all of his patients die of the medicine as much as the disease. Between sleep and work, he had barely time to eat -- and no time whatever for anything else. Perhaps he learned faster this way; the examples of what he was being taught were right there in front of him, all the time, in various states of infection and dissolution. The breakthrough came when he finally figured out the not-so-subtle differences between Terran and Rom, and learned how the biological and chemical mechanisms reacted differently to the specific activities of viri, bacteria, and antibiotics. The differences in cell chemistry went all the way down to gene alignment, causing complex interactions which at times seemed hopeless to follow.

"I feel like a pediatricist called upon to do brain surgery," he complained.

Yilad looked puzzled. "I comprehend the general meaning of what you are saying, but not all of that translates."

"That's because not all of *this* translates," said McCoy, gesturing at the comatose patient in front of him. "I'm a doctor, yes, but a *human* doctor. I know the diseases that are tearing your people apart, I know what will kill the bugs, but none of my treatments work on the *patients*. I'd have just as much luck trying to operate on a fish so that it could walk."

"You would do well to continue your work and ponder the philosophy of the situation somewhat less."

"There's no philosophy involved. It's a matter of time, energy and knowledge. I need help. I can only do so much by myself. I'm not perfect."

"In this case, Doctor McCoy, you will have to be." Yilad gave him an unfathomable look. "You are the only one we have found thus far that we *believe* we can trust. I will aid you in all that is necessary. I will not bring any human assistants in here. We've been through that before."

"Then how in hell do you expect me to accomplish anything here if I only have myself to depend on?"

"You have proven resourceful thus far. I have faith in you, Doctor. So do all of your human patients in the other wing." The implied threat was clear.

"You don't make this any easier," McCoy grumbled.

"For them," observed Yilad, nodding toward the ward full of Rom patients, "it is even more difficult."

"I know. I know." At first McCoy had looked upon these pitiful creatures as only aliens: beings of a sort, unhuman, cruel invaders, and only distantly people. But ultimately the resentment of their presence had been softened by the realization that they were not so very different. McCoy worried about his own sympathies. He still remembered the night that one had died weeping while he struggled to stem the angry tide of the disease that was engulfing the poor creature. Infection had started in the lungs and spread rapidly to all mucous membranes, then to the connective tissue, then the internal organs -- all in the space of four days. The bug which brought it on had mutated and infiltrated the Rom's system so fast that McCoy hadn't even been able to identify it before the man died. He remembered the man grabbing his arm and mumbling inarticulately, before a great fit of coughing wracked the Rom's body and he died gagging. The only words McCoy had picked up through the translator had been, "Help me." McCoy wondered bitterly how he could when he couldn't even help himself. He'd finally identified the virus, hours after the patient was dead. It was influenza, 'Common Cold.'

That was when the second breakthrough came, as McCoy was morosely studying infected tissue from a recent corpse. He had learned the Romulan physiology inside out, but he still couldn't figure out what to use to stop the bugs. Medicines that wouldn't kill the patient didn't kill the germs, either. Why? If the antibiotics worked on the germs in humans, why not in Roms? They were the same germs, weren't they?

"No! No. That was it; they weren't the same,

because they were altered by the alien environment of the unique chemical structure of the Rom biological makeup. What he had to do was experiment, ask the biocomputer team, find out how the Rom body-chemistry altered the germ and then try and approximate that same alteration in the chemical balance of the antibiotics so that the medicines would be able to reach the germs through the new environment they occupied. It sounded easier than it was. Performing a chemical balancing act in a strange biological system which he hadn't even heard of a month before was no cinch, no matter how much he understood the disease he was fighting. Yilad practically peered over his shoulder every minute.

It was a day that seemed as agonizing and endless as any other when the first signs of remission showed in one of his patients. Yilad was as surprised as he was.

"You actually did it!" and the expression on his face was uncanny to behold. It wasn't until then that McCoy realized how close to the edge he had been playing. Yilad had hoped he'd succeed but hadn't really believed he would, not down deep inside where he talked to himself and made his secret decisions.

"Well, it's just a start," McCoy cautioned. "If the remission continues then we'll know that I really am on the right track. But don't expect miracles."

"Compared to what the other outposts around the world have accomplished, this is a miracle." Yilad abruptly shut his mouth and turned away. McCoy realized what a slip that must have been, and wondered again just how bad the world-wide situation was.

Five days later the cure was certain. The patient was recovering, along with several others. Yilad actually invited McCoy into his office for a small toast. McCoy dutifully accepted, but silently worried. He knew that the number of successes was small compared to how many Roms down with ailments there actually were.

It was after that that McCoy noticed his caseload triple, and then quadruple. Beyond the ward windows, he saw more hospital domes going up. That did not look promising. The Roms were getting sick faster than he could cure them.

"Yilad," he ventured, "I've noticed how many more patients have been showing up here. Your base personnel must be almost entirely exhausted, with all these people in here."

"No," Yilad replied edgily, "not really. It is merely that this is the only facility that has had any success in fighting the diseases, and the only place where we have found a Terran doctor we can trust."

"Wait a minute. Do I read that correctly? Are you sending me your sick and infirm from your bases all over the world?"

"That is correct." Yilad seemed to think it was nothing. Either that, or he was faking calm magnificently.

"I'm only one man, Yilad. With all the cases you've got here, I couldn't see all of them in a week! I have been known to sleep occasionally, otherwise I could just cut out eating, too, and have no trouble working all the time."

"You will be provided with assistants."

"Good, finally I can..."

"Rom assistants," Yilad quickly added.

So it goes, thought McCoy.

But he was unprepared for what followed. The next morning he reported to the hospital complex and found a troupe of two dozen Roms standing at attention.

"What's this?" he squawked, "Do I need guards now?"

"No," Yilad replied, "these are your assistants."

"That was quick. Did you fly them in?"

"No. Personnel from other complexes cannot be spared, for various reasons."

"But all these...?"

"They're from this complex. Because of our...your... successes, the power transmitter project has been temporarily halted, and 'Table Mountain,' as you call it, has become our hospital base."

"Why do I get the feeling that this is a lifetime occupation for me now?"

"Proceed with your duties, doctor," Yilad replied, ignoring the question.

McCoy quailed a bit, then stepped up and gave specific instructions to all the "assistants," mostly involving lab work, chemical analyses, and the monitoring of patients. His new staff obediently saluted and marched off to their tasks. McCoy wilted.

He turned to Yilad. "It won't work you know."

"It seems to be working very well." Yilad looked unshakably pleased.

"You know what I mean," McCoy persisted. "My success rate is about 20%, if you call that success; but curing them of one ailment doesn't stop them from getting another! Eventually you're going to have every Rom on this planet in this hospital, and those who aren't sick at that time will be sick soon thereafter. Figure it out, Yilad. This is a losing game: I can save only one in five! You have no immunities. I haven't progressed to the point where I can figure out how to immunize you. If it took ten years I'd be lucky."

"I think you exaggerate, doctor."

"Do I really? You had to quit your power transmitter project here because of epidemics. What about elsewhere? Are your other plans progressing smoothly or is all your manpower being dwindled by sickness?"

Yilad hesitated, obviously at war with himself. He finally said, "It is obvious that a great many are down with diseases peculiar to this world, but we are confident that this obstacle will be overcome." It sounded glib, and utterly false.

"We are confident?" McCoy exploded. "Who's we? Not me! Do you believe it after everything you've seen, or do you still think I'm exaggerating the situation?"

"What I do or do not believe about that subject is unimportant!" Yilad bared his fangs. "What is not unimportant is that we must continue with our plans, under any circumstances, no matter how severe."

"But why? Why is it so important?" McCoy prodded. *Something's going on here, something big...*

"It is our way. That is important enough. Under the circumstances I do not expect you to be sympathetic to our cause. That you are sympathetic to your work is good enough." Yilad's face might have been carved from stone. Diamond perhaps. Adamant.

"It's clear you can't be reasoned with," McCoy sighed retreating. "But there is one thing you're going to have to do if you want to try and stem this epidemic at all. If you won't do it, then this hospital will still be a busy operation long after we've both retired."

"I am listening."

"Send the other humans away, and not just from here, but from all the bases across the planet. They're carriers of nearly every bug that your people have come down with. Even if you don't associate with them much, just being in their proximity, where you breathe the same air they breathe, will be close enough to catch something that they're immune to."

Yilad looked thoughtful, wavering. "It will be taken under consideration."

"Swell, that really makes me happy. I just know my work will be all kinds of easier because of your open-mindedness and understanding." *Roms don't understand sarcasm...*

"Doctor, I will talk to Vlarr," Yilad conceded.

"If it doesn't do any good, bring him down to the infirmary and let me talk to him. He's responsible for that chamber of horrors and he ought to visit it regularly as a reminder of his obstinate planning." McCoy turned away, hiding a desperate hope. Yilad stood thinking for a moment, then squared his shoulders and marched out.

McCoy was heading back to his room that night when he saw someone, a human, walking towards him. It was Caleb Elkins, and he was alone.

"Caleb, what are you doing out without an escort?" McCoy gasped, hustling his friend into the security of his quarters. "They could shoot you on sight!"

"No, I've got a pass," Caleb grinned, showing it. "They've taken to giving them out, having us work in the laundry and things, because they're understaffed. I hear a lot of them are sick or something."

"Yeah, I hear that too. Why did you come to me? Are you sick?"

"No, but I told them that I was so I could see you before tomorrow."

"What's so special about tomorrow?"

"They haven't told you? They're letting us go!"

"What?" McCoy felt an infinite weight drop from his conscience. "Then it must have worked."

"Were you behind this?" Caleb marvelled.

"Yeah, but in order to get you released, I have to stay here."

Caleb was obviously disturbed by this. "But what would be the point? What do they need you for?"

McCoy thought fast. Somehow, he didn't think that being humanitarian to aliens would go over particularly well, especially when those aliens were invaders. *Not that I really have any choice in the matter...* He recalled the fate of his predecessors.

"I'm sort of a hostage. They figure you won't harass them if I'm in here where no one can rescue me."

"That may work for awhile, but there are other ways." Caleb gnawed his lower lip.

"What do you mean?" asked McCoy.

"There's still Atlanta," Caleb leaned close, whispering. "There's still secrets there about the old ways, the phaser weapons. I don't like the idea of dredging up that horror any more than the next person, but we really don't have a choice if we want to stay free. The Roms have got to be driven off in one way or another."

McCoy thought that over, shivering with hope and foreboding. *Will it work? he wondered, Or will a lot of people just die trying?* "I think that probably another will do it before you ever find the schematics to those old weapons," he answered slowly.

"How's that, Doc?"

"Let's just say that Earth doesn't agree with the Roms, and that they'll probably decide to leave on their own without any more lives being lost in trying to drive them out."

"I don't know, Doc." Caleb shook his head resolutely. "It seems like an awful long shot to me."

"What I've seen convinces me there are a few little things on our side. They'll turn the tide in this better than anything we could do ourselves."

"I'll trust your word, Doc," Caleb agreed, "But you know 'bout crop-diversification 's well as I do. 'Never put all your eggs in one basket,' like they say. This 'little thing' of yours might work, but I believe in 'belt an' suspenders too,' if ye know what I mean. I'm gonna try, anyway. Cain't just sit back an' do nothin'."

"I know," McCoy sighed, resigned. "Good luck and keep safe."

Caleb promised to be careful, shook McCoy's hand and slipped away. McCoy sat up for another half hour, brooding. He'd always hated violence. *Why the hell battle with the Roms when the microbes do it so well for you?*

But then he had reason to question his own humanitarianism. In helping the Roms, keeping them alive, was he aiding them in the subjugation of humanity? If he hadn't helped them, they might already have surrendered in the face of the relentless Earth diseases. Then he remembered his wife and daughter, *If I hadn't agreed, what would have happened to them? The Roms would have levelled my house and everyone in it... As it was, I did manage to get the hostages released. At least they were safe from reprisals taken by sickly and embittered troops.*



Cannon

This way was the best, at least for him. If nothing else, now the Roms had proof of exactly what the situation was. If they did leave, they'd know there was no point in returning.

He comforted himself with that thought for the next month.

McCoy was on his way to the lab when Yilad stopped him. "Vlarr wants to see you." The Rom's face was absolutely expressionless.

McCoy suppressed a shudder. His grim prediction of Rom casualties had been thoroughly fulfilled in the past four weeks. There were nearly two thousand Rom patients on Table Mountain now, nearly half of them back for the second time, a few for the third time. They were still dying at the rate of 80%. McCoy had no idea how Vlarr was reacting to this. He managed to keep his voice calm and face neutral.

"Okay, I guess this culture study can wait a few minutes."

McCoy walked silently along wondering if this was finally the showdown. Maybe Vlarr felt that he wasn't doing enough, even though McCoy had clearly been breaking his back to keep these people alive. He knew now that just helping what patients he could would not change the eventual outcome. His cure ratio was still considerably less than 25%. The deaths had to be badly depleting the planetary forces.

When McCoy walked into Vlarr's headquarters, he knew it was worse than he'd expected. The Rom was clearly angry, as furious as McCoy had ever seen any of them, except the dying -- and, that once, Yilad.

"McCoy, I released the other humans because it was clear you were right about the threat from disease," Vlarr snapped, "but now they pose another threat. There have been riots and attacks in outposts all across the land."

"Hey, I can't help that," McCoy gulped. "Besides, you can't blame my people here for riots all across the land."

"The worst was here, though." Vlarr ground his

teeth, fangs bared. "The commander of the planetary forces was assassinated by a mysterious explosion on the coast, not far from here.* The explosion could not be explained by the technology which our reports had discovered on your world. Do you have any opinions?" His eyes glittered dangerously.

"Uh..." McCoy thought fast. "Hell, this is the first I've heard of it. Yilad can tell you that all my time's been tied up with the hospital. I haven't so much as seen another human in, uh, weeks." Caleb! "As for the strange technology, well... You know, Earth once had much better science than it does now. God knows what old defenses could still survive, in the deep places of the Earth..." *Play up mysteries.* "Maybe some of the ancient super-warriors are still alive, wakened by your troops after centuries of sleep. I've heard legends about such things..." He shrugged eloquently.

Vlarr stared at him, eyes betraying--for once--deep and solid terror. "I - I have heard reports of such legends. Your people seemed fearful of such things. Monsters, super-weapons... Would your people dare to reawaken such horrors, only from resentment of us? Would they take such a risk?"

"Sure. You conquered a planet and the people don't like it. Humans love freedom more than life; it's as simple as that. Why come to me? I'm a doctor, not a double-agent."

"And it is only because you have been successful where all others have failed that you are alive." Vlarr leaned on the desk, panting. "Several of our ships have already been recalled due to depleted personnel. Only a skeleton force remains on the planet. I would already have been recalled in disgrace had it not been for your small successes." He ground his teeth again.

McCoy wasn't particularly happy to hear that. "If you want me to try and do more, I'm sorry, but I can't. If you've been paying attention, you've seen that I'm doing all I can. The problems lie with your people, with all of the Roms, not with me. I can help some of you, but I can't keep you from getting sick to begin with. Your immunities are no good here and your bodies just don't adapt to our peculiar micro-organisms. If you want me to say nice things for you to report home, I'll try. I'll invent pretty lies to placate your superiors, but they won't hold for long. The truth is clear to you without my saying a thing. Look around! I've done all I can! Can you suggest anything I haven't done?"

Vlarr looked as if he were about to pounce. McCoy realized that he wanted to be lied to, to be told that everything would work out happily, that this would be a great victory which would assure him the high political position he so badly coveted back home. He didn't want to be told that all his fears of failure were clearly justified. But he was also an experienced warrior, a realist, and he knew what the truth was. "I - I." He began, stammered, paled, shuddered until finally a panicky look spread over his face. He fainted.

"What the hell!" exclaimed McCoy, jumping back.

Yilad rushed forward and lifted Vlarr's face from his desk. He pulled back an eyelid. "He's unconscious. I could tell he had been feeling unwell, but when I asked him if it he became enraged at the suggestion..." Yilad's shoulders slumped. His face looked haunted. "He could not accept the fact that he could become ill as well. He knew that when he did that it would spell the end of the mission. The end of all hope..."

"Let's get him to the ward."

McCoy helped carry Vlarr to the infirmary where he set the medical machinery in motion. He gaped at what he saw on the screen. "My God, this man's been ill

for days! If he'd said something sooner I think I could have done something, but he's in a deep coma already, and his biological functions are rapidly breaking down."

"What's the matter with him?" asked Yilad, leaning on the edge of the machine. Something seemed to have collapsed inside him.

"Chicken Pox. Mutated, of course. It's run wild! He must have been staying upright and conscious through sheer force of will. His system finally just collapsed. He's dying." McCoy sat down with his head in his hands. "Well, it's finally come to this. Who's in charge now, you?"

"I - I'm afraid so." Yilad turned an eerie smile on McCoy. "But you see, doctor, Vlarr isn't...wasn't the only stubborn man among us. I too have been suppressing the knowledge that I am ill." He shuddered heavily, rattling the machine.

McCoy grabbed Yilad and led him to another diagnostic table. He ran through the computer combinations very quickly, being quite expert at it by now. "Oh Christ, not this again! You've got what they call influenza, or the flu for short." *It's what killed that poor bastard who...*

"What can you do for me?" Yilad coughed wetly. His lungs were filling fast.

"Aspirin-analog, heat, irradiation, expectorants - Jesus, only one in five, 20% survival - Damn! Damn! Not you!" I can try everything I know, dammit, but..."

"Me?" Yilad looked amused. "Have you, of all your people, an ability to grow...fond of even one of us? We are the invaders, after all. Your kind would rather die than submit to us. I am only one more alien, McCoy."

"I must be an idiot, but I can't watch someone, anyone, die when I have it in me to at least *try* and do something about it." McCoy almost cried. *That hurt...this hurts... Is he right? Have I actually developed a liking for one of these devil-eared...?* He clamped his mind shut on the thought. At least he wouldn't ever admit such a thing, not to one of them, anyway. Not even to Yilad. He ran to the supply closet.

The battle took three long days, during which McCoy barely slept or ate. He snatched quick naps and quick meals during the endless rounds from ward to ward, bed to bed, always checking Vlarr and Yilad every hour or so. By the end of the first day he knew he was going to lose; Vlarr was hardly ever conscious, his whole body ulcerated like a human Black Plague victim's with draining sores, and Yilad lay half-awake and motionless, calmly watching his flesh shrivel and burn. McCoy observed, swore, varied his treatments, moved on and returned to observe again.

Meanwhile, the organization of the hospital collapsed around him. Some junior officer whom McCoy barely knew on sight took charge of the base within the hour of Vlarr's fall; McCoy found him among the Mumps victims next morning, and he died before nightfall. After that, with a speed that left McCoy stunned with disbelief, chaos ensued. Able-bodied officers and troops deserted as fast as they could steal away to their ships, dropping their medical tasks in mid motion. One of McCoy's assistants came down with Feline Distemper, and the rest of the staff vanished before sundown. By the end of the second day the base was deserted, except for the patients and McCoy. Without continuous nursing, the patients died faster.

As he stumbled through the empty corridors, going on stimulants and vitamin injections, McCoy marvelled numbly at how fast these State-loving types gave up and ran when there was no one around to give them orders. *Free men wouldn't run like that,* he thought, bumping into an abandoned service-cart. *We'd have had better sense... Of course, what's the sense of me hanging on here? I could probably run away any time and not be noticed...* Nonetheless, he plodded on down the corridor to the ward where Vlarr was lying alone among the dead. McCoy couldn't even dispose of all the dead by himself;

corpses lay side by side with the dying.

Vlarr was close to conscious for once. McCoy recognized the last burst of strength from a dying body. If he wanted to talk to Vlarr, this was his last chance. He leaned close, noting with horrified fascination that there was scarcely a square inch of whole skin left on the Romulan's body. "Vlarr," he said gently, "Can you hear me?"

"Yilad..." the dying commander murmured. "Brother-in-steel..."

"It's me, McCoy."

Vlarr didn't hear him. "Old friend...sorry..."

"Sorry? For what?" McCoy didn't like the way this touched him.

"You were right..." Vlarr's voice was failing. "Should never have...command here...My ambition did... get us both killed..."

How does he know about Yilad? McCoy marvelled.

"Yilad is alive," he said.

"Not for long," said Vlarr, in a last burst of lucidity. "Saw...felt...same death clawing...blood-brothers...have no secrets..." He eyes fell shut. The diagnostic screen showed a grim pattern.

"Blood-brothers..." McCoy murmured as he got up and tottered away. "They have that, too." He went on down the ward, blindly trying to save someone.

On the beginning of the third day the dispensing-machine broke down. There was no one left to fix it. The dead patients outnumbered the living by three to one.

Vlarr died while McCoy was treating Yilad. McCoy decided not to mention it. There would be no point. Somehow, Yilad knew it anyway.

"So, Vlarr is dead," he sighed, not looking at McCoy. "My proud, ambitious, sorry old friend. And... I am dying too, am I not?"

McCoy decided to be honest with Yilad. He felt that he owed the man something, after all. Little though he liked the idea, they had been friends, of a sort. "I'm sorry, Yilad. There's nothing I can do."

"I am not surprised. We stayed too long. Everyone else is at last dying as well. I have seen the signs, the abandonment...I guessed it would end this way. Vlarr hadn't been told yet, but I received word that all the other ships had departed, all the other bases were abandoned, and ours was the only one left. Even had Vlarr not been stricken, his failure would have required a final act of patriotism."

"What do you mean?" "Patriotism"? That old killer...?

Yilad gave a long sigh, and turned to look at McCoy. "This mission, everything we did, was for our home worlds. The home worlds are sacred to us. To fail here was to fail them. Vlarr is gone, I am going. The final act of patriotism falls to me. I doubt if you understand, even now..."

"I sure don't. What the devil are you talking about?" Nonetheless, McCoy felt a chill prickle his neck.

"Honor. Final honor." Yilad's hand moved under the blankets. "You say you do not understand, even though you have stayed here to the end, even though you have an oath which you serve..."

"Yilad...?" "I...should have told him...that I liked him..."

Yilad pulled his disrupter from its holster.

"What are you doing?! Suicide?!" Should I stop him? My oath - Enemy -

"Yes, doctor. I'm dying anyway. I don't wish to suffer like the others. My last act of patriotism is to die honorably." He paused, eyes glittering, waiting to hear what McCoy would answer. McCoy said nothing; he was torn to silence by his dilemma. Yilad smiled eerily, as if he'd confirmed a suspicion. "So, you have become Rom enough to let an enemy choose death,

regardless of your human oath. Very well; we shall be all Rom, then. But for us, honor also lies in not leaving the witness to our ignominy."

"What...? Oh Jesus!"

Yilad was slowly, painfully bringing the gun around to point at McCoy.

McCoy jumped up and ran like a bat out of hell. He ducked behind the mass of a medical computer and heard a bubbling hiss followed by an explosion right behind him which plastered him against a wall. As he slid to the floor he felt a stinging pain in his lower back. When he hit the ground he couldn't move, but he was still conscious.

"I'm sorry, doctor," Yilad said painfully, hesitantly, "but it is our way. What is not our way is cannibalism. We do not eat intelligent beings. I am sorry about that, too. It was a necessary life, at least at first. You do have great honor, doctor; your own, and some of ours. Thus we both die honorably."

McCoy heard another bubbling hiss, and then silence. His mind hazed over and slid into unconsciousness.

When he opened his eyes again he couldn't tell if an hour or a day had passed. He tried to move and found that his muscles responded above his waist, but below he was clearly paralyzed. He dragged himself forward and out the door. His bag, his instruments, were in his room. It was painfully far, now. He dragged himself along the floor with his elbows, stopping every few feet to catch his breath which hissed painfully between his teeth. The whole hospital was silent as a tomb. He concentrated his full attention on reaching his instrument-bag, and tried to ignore the pain in his back. Finally he reached his room. It, too, was empty -- save for his gear. He pulled a needle and an ampule of morphine from his bag and gave himself a shot. At least he'd be able to move a little more without pain. He cleansed the wound as best he could and then bandaged it. He couldn't tell if it had fragments of metal in it or not, and right now he lacked the strength to go back over to the lab and use the medical computers on himself. He'd have to wait awhile and see if he grew stronger. If he didn't, well, then Yilad would have his wish and they'd share in that last act of patriotism after all. 'Patriotism'...Can you feel 'patriotic' about a whole world? Yes, I guess so. What does that make me? ...A doctor, no matter what. That's where my honor lies, Yilad. I betrayed that for a moment, and look what happened...

McCoy pulled himself onto the bed, found a comfortable position for himself, and lay back. Maybe I'll be found, soon. Maybe Caleb and the others will come up here. God, will I last that long? He sighed, wondering if he'd ever see his family and friends again. His eyes rested on something on the table at the head of his bed. It was Joanna's book, the one he had brought with him. It occurred to him that the title was so appropriate to all this that it was utterly ghastly. He laughed softly, reached over and picked it up, reading the title above the garish cover drawing.

THE WAR OF THE WORLDS by H.G. Wells.

Take care of your ecosystem, and it'll take care of you, McCoy thought, laughing silently. It'll even fight your wars for you... Me? I'm a doctor. Non-combatant, even by the 'laws' of the bad old days. I just take care of the casualties, let the war go on without my help. Earth could always defend itself that way -- and who should know it better than me? Been fighting disease all my life...God, I know what an enemy it can be!

His eyes blurred with tears, but he kept laughing all the way down into the dark.



